

## What Makes a Society? Lessons from the Antipodes

Salvatore Babones

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? -- Genesis 4:6

The first thing I noticed when I moved from New York to Sydney was that there's no snow in Sydney. It was late April, so there was no snow in New York either, but the difference is that it never snows in Sydney. Snow or no snow, one thing that New York and Sydney have in common is that both are cities of awnings: the sidewalks are covered by endless canopies that overhang all the storefronts. In New York it snows, so the awnings are sloped (to allow the snow to fall off). In Sydney it never snows, so the awnings are flat. If it ever snowed in Sydney, it would be a catastrophe of immense proportions as all the city's awnings collapsed on the crowds of pedestrians cowering beneath them. Luckily it never snows in Sydney.

If there were such a mass trauma event in Sydney, though, at least people would get the medical attention they needed. Like every other developed country (except the United States), Australia has universal healthcare. Australia has a government health insurance plan called Medicare, similar to Medicare in the United States, except that it covers everyone, not just old people. Were all of New York's awnings to collapse in a mass catastrophe, injuring 100,000 cowering pedestrians, some 20,000 would have no way to pay for their medical care, physical therapy, or wheelchairs. A further 20,000 might get some care, but suffer severe stress paying their insurance deductibles. Luckily for uninsured New Yorkers, New York has sloped awnings.

The second thing I noticed when I moved to Sydney was that the public parks here aren't sponsored by corporate donors. This surprised me. When I approached a meticulously maintained green space in central Sydney and saw the massive letters "H P" emblazoned on the sidewalk in front of the main entrance, I assumed (naturally enough) that the park was sponsored by Hewlett Packard, the computer company. After all, the park was *beautiful*. The paths were free of cracks and weeds; the edges of the grass were neatly trimmed; seasonal flowers were planted in freshly raked mounds of mulch. The fountains were actually turned on, with water flowing through them! Being American, I'd never seen this kind of care in a *public* park.

"H P", it turned out, stood for "Hyde Park", not "Hewlett Packard", and Hyde Park is indeed a public park paid for with public money. So is Victoria Park, an even more extravagantly gardened park on the outskirts of Sydney that I walk through every day on my way to work. Sydney also has free public museums, free public tennis courts, and even free public swimming pools -- though nothing to match the one-of-a-kind Streets Beach pool in Brisbane, Australia. This complex of three man-made swimming lagoons surrounded by sandy beaches and palm trees is not only free, but open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's also the cleanest pool I've ever swum in. It is, quite simply, miraculous. Australia's a great country.

[America's Poverty, Australia's Riches](#)

Australia, however, is not rich by American standards, and Sydney is certainly not rich by New York standards. Australia's national income per capita is only 80% of US levels. What's more, Australia's small market and relative isolation mean that most consumer goods are more expensive in Australia than in the US. People here make less money and most things cost more money. So how is it that Australia has first-class public amenities (like parks) and public services (like healthcare) when American doesn't?

You can see the answer acted out every night on the streets of Sydney. Like any big city, Sydney has residents who suffer from homelessness, substance abuse, and mental illness -- often all three at once. In big American cities, homeless alcoholic schizophrenics are more likely to end up in a jail than in a hospital. In rural areas, they're more often just picked up, trundled into the back of a police cruiser, and dropped off at the county border. And anyone who's seen American police in action knows the everyone gets handcuffed -- forcefully. The American response to a disturbance is to lock it (him or her) away.

In Sydney, the police actually talk to people. They ask whether or not they're alright. They offer to help them, and to help them get help. They don't nudge sleeping street people with their boots or poke at them with their nightsticks. They actually seem to care. It probably doesn't hurt that over a quarter of Australian police are women. What's more, the Sydney city government has a dedicated homelessness unit that includes, among other services, a street drinking program. Here's a snippet from their website:

The City of Sydney is committed to finding compassionate solutions to complex social problems. The Street Drinking Strategy seeks to provide a holistic, consistent and coordinated response to address the impact street drinking can have on individuals and the community. In this Strategy, street drinking refers to drinking in public places by people who may be alcohol dependent, homeless, marginally housed or otherwise socially disadvantaged.

In most of the United States, there might as well be a law on the books that says that anyone who calls for "compassionate solutions to complex social problems" should immediately be deported to Europe. Even California, America's richest and most progressive state, is currently debating the elimination of all -- ALL! -- state-funded social services. New York isn't doing much better. The "socially disadvantaged" just aren't very popular in the United States.

They may not be popular in Sydney either, but to people in Sydney the homeless, the addicted, and the insane are still people, and that makes all the difference. Australians may not have as much money as Americans, but they spend more of what they have on creating better lives for their people. Ask any person in the world, American, Australian, European, African, whatever, "what's more important -- people or things?" and the answer everywhere will be "people". What separates Americans and Australians is that to an American, the answer "people" means "me and my family". To an Australian, to a much greater extent, it means "my neighbors, my coworkers, my countrymen". People matter to Australians, and so people matter in Australia. In Jimmy Carter's formulation of the famous aphorism:

The measure of a society is found in how they treat their weakest and most helpless citizens.

By this measure, Australia truly is a rich country.

## But Is This Enough?

It's very nice to live in a country that takes care of its weakest and most helpless citizens, and I'm very happy that I do. I wish my own country, the United States, would do so. But in the larger scheme of humanity it hardly matters. The weakest and most helpless people of the world are not citizens of Australia or America or countries like them. Only about 20% of the people of the world live in countries that we would recognize as "developed". Most people in the world are poor -- desperately poor by our standards. If you think you're "normal" or "average", think again. By world standards, by the standards of all the people alive today, you are wealthy. Very wealthy.

Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than by bathroom habits. Like most Americans (or Australians), I've never in my life -- excuse my language -- crapped on the ground. I rarely use outhouses (only when camping) and I turn up my nose at porta-potties. Yet even today, in 2009, about 1/3 of the people living on Earth right now crap directly on the ground. Another 1/3 typically have access to an outhouse of some kind, often just a shack over an open shitpile, as illustrated in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Only the richest 1/3 -- the people living in wealthy countries and the wealthy people living in poor countries -- actually use indoor flush toilets with running water. Amazingly, most people alive today have never flushed a toilet!

Needless to say, in most of the world there are, practically speaking, no services for the homeless, the addicted, or the mentally ill. For that matter, in most of the world the homeless, addicted, and mentally ill aren't even particularly weak or helpless, compared to the general population. In some sense they *are* the general population. Where a home is a tin roof with taped-together plastic garbage bags for walls, where people chew coca leaves all day to fight off constant hunger, where people are chronically depressed because they can't afford to care for their children . . . what does it mean to be among the less fortunate? It's simply normal to be less fortunate.

If we think of a city as a society, Sydney measures well by President Carter's standards. Similarly, if we think of a country as a society, Australia measures well. But if we think of the world as a society -- of human society as a single, collective project -- then humanity simply doesn't measure up. As a species, we do not care for "our" less fortunate citizens. Quite the contrary: we band together in exclusive, relatively homogeneous groups (Australians, Americans, Green Springs Golf Club members, etc.) and try our best to keep everyone else out. The Statue of Liberty greeting visitors to New York for the past 123 years may proclaim:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.

But in reality developed countries like the United States only welcome young, educated, relatively wealthy immigrants. No wretched refuse need apply! Our preferred approach to helping the world's poor is to serve them where they live, in hopes that they won't try to sneak into our privileged palaces. This isn't such a bad idea in principle, but in practice no country gives even as much as 1% of its national income to help the less fortunate of the world.

Norway and Sweden come close, giving over 0.9% of national income in development aid, and all other countries fall far short of even this low level of assistance. Generous Australia gives only 0.3%; stingy America just half of that. Nowhere is foreign aid a top political priority. We simply don't care.

The tragic irony is that the problems of the global poor are not only our responsibility as fellow human beings, but increasingly are actually our responsibility in the direct sense that we cause them. This is nowhere clearer than when talking about global warming. Every American and Australian is responsible for about twice the emissions of a German, five times the emissions of a Brazilian, and fifteen times the emissions of an Indian. The average Australian is responsible for about thirty times the greenhouse gas emissions of the average Bangladeshi. And of course we've been doing most of the world's emitting for almost two centuries now. Global warming is our responsibility -- but it is not our problem.

No one living in Sydney or New York will starve because of global warming. None of us will contract malaria, suffer severe malnutrition, or be drowned by rising tides stoked by global warming. Global warming is, for us, a dismaying and potentially expensive challenge, but it is not a mortal peril. It's an inconvenient truth, not a pressing problem. It's about losing our polar bears, not about losing our newborn babies to starvation because we're not eating enough to produce milk, or seeing our children become dehydrated from drinking brackish water, or comforting our babies who are covered in welts from dengue fever. When sea levels rise, Americans build bigger seawalls; when sea levels rise, Bangladeshis get wet. It's the world's poor who will pay the price for global warming, not us.

The United States and Australia are very different when it comes to taking responsibility for their own citizens, but they have a lot in common when it comes to taking responsibility for global warming. Among major developed countries they are the top two greenhouse gas emitters as well as the two countries most resistant to international efforts at emissions control. Under Bush and Howard they refused to join international conventions on climate change; under Obama and Rudd they are dithering and stalling, despite campaign commitments to the contrary. The reason is obvious: Americans and Australians like to drive (fly, eat meat, etc.), and don't really know or care that their activities will lead to tens of millions of excess deaths in places like Bangladesh.

To Americans and Australians alike, "caring about people" doesn't mean "caring about people in Bangladesh". People in Bangladesh aren't part of our ideas of our societies. They're not "us".

### Our Brothers' Keepers

In the Biblical story of Cain and Able, Cain professes not to know -- or care -- where Able is or what he's up to. That's bad enough, so far as it goes. We all know that we should be looking after each other, helping each other, caring about each other. But of course in the Biblical story Cain is guilty of far more than a simple lack of concern. Cain murdered Able then pretended he know nothing about it. That's exactly what we're doing today, every day, all around the world. This is not an overstatement when it comes to development aid, greenhouse gas emissions, or a host of other issues. We are making self-serving decisions that cause other people to die while we look the other way. If that's not murder, what is?

It would be nice instead to live in a world where people took care of people. Australia is like that, at least so far as other Australians are concerned, and it makes Australia a very nice place to live. I go on long walks around Sydney every week. It's nice to walk around a city where there is no real poverty, where there are no homeless people camping under highway bridges, where the fast food restaurants don't have to install bullet proof glass in the drive-through windows. But Australia is an island of prosperity and sociability, literally and metaphorically. Australia is like an exclusive country club that you either have to be born into or invited to join. I've been lucky enough to have received an invitation, and for that I'm grateful. But very few people are so lucky.

What the world needs is for the people of the world to recognize that they all belong to the same society, that they're all members of the same club. Australians at least recognize that all Australians are members of the same club; Americans don't even go that far. But all the people of the world, Americans included -- Americans especially -- must learn to think of all the people of the world as members of a *single* society. Their own society. The people of the world -- Americans included -- must join together not to save the world from global warming or some other catastrophe, but simply because it's the right thing to do. "No man is an island", not even in Australia. We should be our brothers' keepers simply because they're our brothers, full stop.

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