

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 67):

The Ukrainian President's Address to the Australian Parliament

11 April 2022

On 31 March, following on from his address to the Japanese Diet (Parliament), Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy gave an address to the Australian Parliament (the English language text of his address can be read [here](#)). I had the opportunity to listen to the address up close from the public viewing gallery together with the ambassadors of many other nations. This is my report about that experience.

1. Innovative approaches

Speaking as one who once learned the history of diplomacy, I think that, when future diplomatic historians look back upon the current Ukraine crisis, they will focus their attention on advances in two types of methodological approaches.

The first of these is the active disclosure and sharing of declassified intelligence. The second is innovative public messaging by the Ukrainian side, particularly direct and effective outreach towards the governments of friendly nations and parliamentary representatives.



Ukrainian President Zelenskyy delivering an address
(Picture: Website of the Office of the President of Ukraine)

As specific examples of the latter, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has given addresses to foreign parliaments including those in the EU, UK, Canada, and the US. Following on from his address to the Japanese Diet, this time he addressed the Australian Parliament.

2. A heart-warming welcome

As a prelude to President Zelenskyy's address, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese both gave welcoming statements. While expressing their heart-felt sympathy with the tragedy that has befallen Ukraine, they both vowed to give Ukraine their full support.

President Zelenskyy then appeared online, and gave a rousing address that showed no indication of weariness. He was dressed in his trademark khaki-coloured t-shirt. The ambassador of a certain country sitting in the front row of the viewing gallery exclaimed in astonishment "the longer he gives an address, the more likely he is to be located and subject to missile attack; what an extraordinarily brave politician".

Initially the voice of the interpreter was difficult to hear, and the address started rather quietly. However by the time it ended, those present in the House of Representatives, which was filled to capacity with members of both Houses, had risen as one to give a standing ovation. Thus the address was a triumphant success.



The Australian Parliament engaged in a standing ovation

(Picture: ABC News)

3. A tailor-made message

What impressed me about the address was how it had been tailor-made in acute awareness of its Australian audience.

For example, the address touched upon the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, an incident about which every Australian remembers when referring to Ukraine (it occurred in 2014. Of the 298 victims, 38 were Australian). President Zelenskyy said “if the world had punished Russia for what it did in 2014, there would be none of the horrors of this invasion of Ukraine in 2022”. This statement was well-received by the audience.



The site of the shooting down of MH17

(Picture: DFAT)

Furthermore, while expressing thanks for the aid provided by Australia, the address also stressed the importance of further assistance. President Zelenskyy spoke in a straightforward manner, saying “Ukraine must have everything it needs on the battlefield. For example, you have wonderful Bushmaster armoured vehicles that can significantly help Ukraine. If you have the opportunity - Ukraine will be grateful to you”.



Bushmaster armoured vehicles

(Picture: Australian Army website)

To send a message that resonates in the hearts of the audience – I was left deeply impressed by such passionate and skilled leadership. I directly felt the gravitas and effective use of language of a political leader in a time of national crisis.

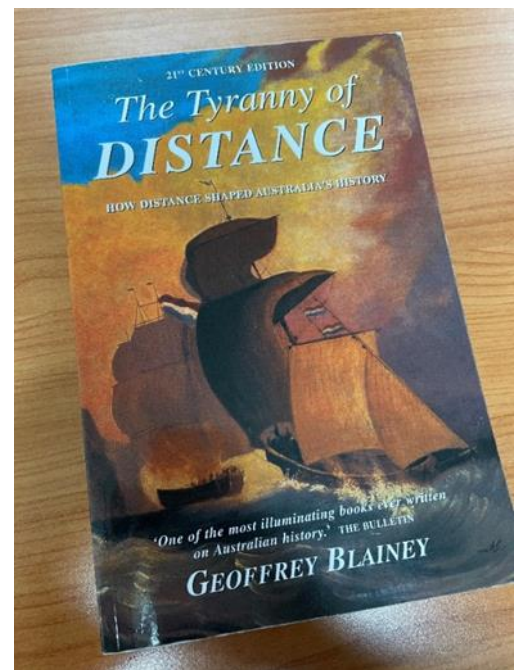
4. A lightning-fast response

Another thing that impressed me was the lightning fast response by the Australian government. On the day following the address, Prime Minister Morrison himself announced an additional AUD\$25 million in military assistance. This included an announcement to deliver Bushmaster armoured vehicles by air using C-17 transport aircraft.

When I speak with ambassadors from northern and central Europe in Canberra, I often hear the expression “Our War” in reference to the Ukraine crisis. In their mind, the war waged by Putin’s Russia is a war on the international community, and Ukraine is fighting this war at the forefront on their behalf.

By talking to my fellow ambassadors, I learnt that a central European ambassador, a good friend of mine, has taken in refugees from Ukraine into his family home in Europe. I also learned that the son of a northern European ambassador had volunteered to join Ukraine’s International Legion of Territorial Defence.

Australia is over 15,000km away from Ukraine. While there “is a limit to what Australia can do given the ‘tyranny of distance’”, it is a nation with a firm awareness of the “need to continue to stand at the forefront of international initiatives”.



‘The Tyranny of Distance’ by Geoffrey Blainey.

Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey coined the term ‘tyranny of distance’ to define Australia’s diplomatic consciousness.

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