Barack Obama’s success poses questions for Australia

Barack Obama’s success in defeating the ‘heir apparent’ for the Democratic nomination for the US Presidency brings new excitement to the race to the White House. But Obama’s candidacy also holds important economic implications for Australia, according to Flinders University’s Head of American Studies, Professor Don DeBats.

Describing the outcome of the long-running primary election battle between Obama and Hillary Clinton as “remarkable and historic,” Professor DeBats said both candidates took positions on free trade that did not necessarily align with Australia’s best economic interests. “Traditionally Australia has wanted someone in the White House who is sympathetic to free trade and, if Barack Obama becomes the President, that won’t be the case,” Professor DeBats told Flinders Journal.

“Obama’s Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, is a free trade advocate and has voted that way in the Senate but Senator Obama has voted consistently against free trade,” he said. “Australia also has a great interest in bringing down subsidies contained in the US Farm Bill – which dumps billions of dollars into agricultural support and distorts prices and markets to Australia’s disadvantage. McCain has opposed the Farm Bill but Obama has supported it. In this election cycle particularly, the Democrats are the more protectionist party.

continued on page 2
When a devastating earthquake rocked the Chinese province of Sichuan last month, its impact was felt around the world, including Flinders University where 80 students from the affected region are enrolled.

The disaster spawned many stories of courage and dedication. In Beijing, two students took part in a special graduation ceremony for Flinders’ Masters of Education just days after being caught up in the tragedy.

Having flown out of Sichuan a few hours before the earthquake struck, Zhao Jiutong an English teacher of Mianyang Art College, had an agonising wait before finding out his wife and children were still alive, only to be told his nephew had been killed.

Wang Chunrong, Deputy Principal of Mianyang Dongchen International School, was driving to Beijing when she was forced to stop the car after feeling as though she was driving on the ocean.

In a statement to the University’s staff and students, Flinders Vice-Chancellor, Professor Michael Barber, expressed his deepest condolences to the people of China.

“Our thoughts are with those struggling to cope with the disaster and it is important to be mindful in the weeks and months ahead of the plight of those who have lost their homes, their loved ones, and many other things that we take for granted,” Professor Barber said.

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology, Professor Faith Trent, was inspired by the fact that both Sichuan students were determined to graduate from the program alongside their 53 classmates.

“It was truly indicative of the dedication both our Chinese and international students show not only to their studies, but to Flinders University as well,” Professor Trent said.

In another amazing feat, fellow graduate Chen Xiumei crossed the stage to receive her Masters just five days after giving birth to a baby boy, Theodore.

Professor Trent said she greatly admired the willingness of the Chinese people to help their fellow countrymen.

“Being in China when it happened is something I’ll never forget,” Professor Trent said.

“There was an extraordinary outpouring of grief, with hundreds of people lining up at makeshift blood banks across the city or to hand over what little money they could – they simply gave whatever they could to help,” she said.

Emma Kibble

International

Chinese students prevail over earthquake

Graduates (L-R) Chen Xiumei, Zhao Jiutong and Wang Chunrong with Professor Bob Conway and Professor Faith Trent in Beijing

Obama’s success poses questions .......... continued from page 1

“I think a lot of people in Australia are fascinated by Obama and the change he represents and promises, as are a lot of people in the United States. But before we get too carried away, it’s important to recognise that there are some very real economic policy complications for Australia should he be elected in November.”

In a recently published book, ‘More than an Ally?’ Contemporary Australia-US Relations, Flinders School of Political and International Studies lecturer, Dr Maryanne Kelton analyses the relationship between the Howard Government and the Clinton and Bush Administrations.

“In its early trade disputes with the US over an Australian leather manufacturer’s increased share of the US automotive market and the imposition of US tariffs on the export of Australian lamb, the Howard Government was unable to leverage its special relationship to exact promised material gain in its trade negotiations,” Dr Kelton writes.

“Although the US signed the free trade agreement with Australia, and though it is too early to determine the financial success of the deal, the negotiations clearly failed to meet the Government’s initial expectations for the agreement,” she says.

“These outcomes reflect both the exigencies of power in bilateral negotiations for any small government, in addition to a misplaced belief that a cultural affinity would deliver material gain.”

Ultimately, Dr Kelton concludes “the success of bilateralism as a strategy with the US and the delivery of successful outcomes for Australia rest on a convergence with US domestic interests.”

As the US moves into the next phase of the Presidential race, Professor DeBats said Barack Obama would be formally accepting the nomination at the Democratic Party’s convention in August, almost 45 years to the day since Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream” speech set the stage for decades of civil rights activism.

“I think Dr King would have been very proud of this moment,” Professor DeBats said.

Peter Gill

COVER PHOTO: Barack Obama, Justin Sullivan, Getty Images
Climate change is killing the Coorong

Dr Benger, from the School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, told Flinders Journal. "Researchers in our cluster have documented accelerated species loss throughout the Coorong, with many species of fish, aquatic vegetation and macroinvertebrates disappearing completely from the system or now restricted to smaller areas near the Murray Mouth," he said.

Dr Benger said rising salinity levels in the lakes – up to four times accepted maximum levels for Adelaide drinking water – were thought to be behind emerging problems such as the spread of polychaete worms which build large calcareous mounds wherever colonies become established.

"Larger creatures such as crabs and turtles are being overwhelmed by the weight of worm formations on their shells and are dying in large numbers," he said.

"A species that is thriving in numbers never before seen is Brine Shrimp, one of the few organisms that can flourish in the now permanently hypersaline southern lagoon of the Coorong.

"This was an area once characterised by unique ecosystems of seagrass, abundant fish, hundreds of thousands of migratory birds and organisms of all kinds. Lack of freshwater flows into the Coorong has led to a collapse of the food chain and, with little for the birds to feed on, the dying system no longer attracts large numbers of migratory birds, threatening its status as a Wetland of International Importance under the RAMSAR convention."

Dr Benger said his component of the Flinders research, supported by the CSIRO Water for a Healthy Country Flagship under the Coorong Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth (CLLAMM) ecology program, was recording the physical habitats of the Coorong and developing dynamic Geographical Information Systems (GIS) based models of how the area might respond to changes in water level and water quality.

"If fresh water should once again become available from the Lower Lakes and the Upper South East Drainage Scheme in significant volumes, we will be able to predict how the system might respond," he said.

Peter Gill

Good news for bad sleepers

New research at Flinders University holds out the promise of drug-free relief from insomnia for older adults.

Researchers from the School of Psychology are seeking participants in a project to investigate a new treatment for insomnia sufferers over 55 years of age.

Professor Leon Lack, an internationally renowned sleep researcher, said that for many older adults, night-time sleep is often disturbed by frequent awakenings across the night and morning, with difficulty getting back to sleep.

"These sleep difficulties and sleep losses often have a negative impact during the day, such as feelings of fatigue and difficulty in concentrating, resulting in a reduced quality of life," Professor Lack said.

"The most common method of treatment for insomnia is with medication, but while this type of treatment can provide some short-term symptomatic help, it can lead to dependency and may even result in worse sleep after the treatment has stopped," he said.

"Non-drug treatments for insomnia obviously avoid these side-effects."

The new research, funded by the National Medical Health and Research Council, focuses on a non-drug treatment that is expected to result in a higher quality of sleep as well as improved daytime functioning for participants. The treatment plan includes a complete sleep recording and four weekly therapy sessions.

People with sleep disturbances who are over 55 years of age and interested in participating in the research, are encouraged to contact: Ms Jane Cocks, or Dr Helen Wright in the School of Psychology at Flinders on 08 8201 2377, or email sleep@flinders.edu.au
Back to the future with rocket relics

Recently found fragments from a Europa rocket launched at Woomera 42 years ago are a poignant reminder of Australia’s glory days in the space race but also point to future possibilities, according to Flinders archaeologist, Dr Alice Gorman.

Dr Gorman said several test launches of Europa rockets were made from the Woomera complex between 1964 and 1970, a period when Australia provided the launch site for Europe’s pioneer space program. The experimental rockets were a collaborative project of the United Kingdom, Germany and France, with each country contributing a part of the three-stage rocket to carry an Italian made satellite.

While none of the launches succeeded in the program’s aim of placing a satellite in space, Dr Gorman said the Europa project laid the basis for the later development of the European Space Agency’s Ariane, one of the most successful launchers in the world.

Descriptions of the metal wreckage, found north of the Simpson Desert by a geological survey team, suggest it is from the upper end of the first stage rocket, the UK-built and designed Blue Streak. A pencil inscription dates the launch to 1966, a year when two Europa rockets were launched.

Since the scaling-down of Woomera with the end of its role in Europe and America’s military and civil space programs in the early 1970s, Dr Gorman said there has been a tendency to forget the level of space-related activity in Australia, including the successful launch of the Australian-made WRESAT-1 satellite in 1967.

“There was a tremendous excitement and optimism about it all,” Dr Gorman said.

“When the Europa program ended and the Apollo missions wound down, Woomera fell over in a heap: suddenly we went from being a big player in the space industry to virtually nothing,” she said.

Dr Gorman said the lack of a local space program has left Australia completely dependent in vital areas of security and telecommunications, but with a Senate Inquiry currently considering the re-establishment of an Australian space agency, there is a possibility that Australia’s role may yet be revived.

While space junk is very collectible, the debris is legally likely to be government property. Dr Gorman hopes it will end up on display either at the Woomera Heritage Centre or the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Charles Gent

Space relics photo courtesy of ABC

An Europa launch site near Woomera

A balanced approach to the environment

Attitudes towards environmental history tend to be polarised, either glorifying the achievements of the past or damning them for their recent consequences; now a new course in

Dr Carol Fort

Attitudes towards environmental history tend to be polarised, either glorifying the achievements of the past or damning them for their recent consequences; now a new course in

history offers a balanced and analytical look at Australia’s chequered past.

Coordinator of the new Australian Environmental Histories topic at Flinders, Dr Carol Fort, said the introduction of the course reflects a global surge in interest in the environment and its place in human history.

European colonisation of Australia had profound and sometimes devastating effects both on the natural world as well as on Indigenous societies, Dr Fort said. The British did make some attempt to understand the natural systems of the countries they colonised, even if hindsight shows that their programs of urbanisation, agriculture and land management were sometimes environmentally damaging in their long-term consequences.

Dr Fort said it is true that modern environmental recovery often involves undoing the infrastructure of the British colonists in countries such as Australia and India.

Nevertheless, she said, it needs to be remembered that they were often driven by Utopian ideals and a sense of optimism, fuelled by the scientific revolution.

“It’s easy for us to look back now and say that they didn’t know what they were doing, but we need to understand who they were and why they thought the way they did,” Dr Fort said.

“The environment is used as a political playground and is highly contested – our students, as the educated people of the future, need better analytical tools and the discernment to make good decisions and to stand by them in difficult circumstances.”

Charles Gent
Flinders University will become the first tertiary institution in the world to offer a new qualification for middle school educators teaching the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP). The University’s offering of a Graduate Certificate follows the School of Education’s official accreditation by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) last month. Flinders will also become only the second university in the world to offer a Masters in education (IB) under the same agreement with the IBO. Viewed as an international alternative to locally-based government education curriculum, the International Baccalaureate (IB) is a global education framework which has been adopted by hundreds of schools across Australia and overseas – including by more than 60 schools in South Australia.

"Until recently, teachers in IB schools have become accredited via a series of professional development workshops held in their region," Dean of the School of Education at Flinders, Professor Bob Conway, said.

"However, due to the significant growth in the number of IB schools worldwide, a more formal level of professional recognition is now required. As a result, the IBO has been working with a small network of universities around the world, including Flinders, to develop and offer these recognised courses," he said. According to Professor Conway, Flinders’ quality assurance model and its strong international focus were significant factors in its rapid accreditation by an IBO delegation that visited Adelaide last month.

An inaugural group of 20 students will take part in a pilot Graduate Certificate program, which is scheduled to begin in October this year, and will involve a series of three intensive workshops covering the IB Middle Years Program curriculum framework, teaching and assessment.

Coordinated by Kathy Brady, both the Graduate Certificate (IBMYP) and the Masters in Education (IB) will be full-fee paying programmes and only open to teachers who currently work in IB schools in Australia and overseas. According to Ms Brady, each intensive workshop will also feature a three-day field placement at Concordia College, one of the premier IB schools in the state.

"We are extremely fortunate to have Concordia as a partner for this program, especially in relation to the College staff who will participate in the teaching programme to ensure we provide our students with the most up-to-date methods and information as possible,” Ms Brady said. Since the accreditation was announced on the IBO website in May, the School of Education has received many requests for information from around the world, including Singapore and Hong Kong.

"Such has been the level of interest in this course already, we have no doubt that once we are up and running, every intake for these courses will be oversubscribed," Ms Brady said.

Emma Kibble

The nearly completed Education building will be home to IB students
Inset: Professor Bob Conway

Summit points to action on education

Higher education has emerged as a key area for action from the Federal Government’s 2020 Summit in April. The Final Summit Report, published last month, calls for the development of a “world class university system by 2020” which includes a move to “educational funding systems that are flexible, without central bureaucracies dictating plans”.

High on his list of “good practical ideas” from the Summit, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, nominated a Community Corps scheme “whereby young Australians undertake community service in return for HECS debt relief”. Flinders academics at the Summit were Senior Lecturer in Political and International Studies, Dr Andrew O’Neil, and Associate Professor of Law Michele Slatter. Both welcomed the opportunity to put ideas on the Summit table and said the true value of the event would be reflected in tangible outcomes. Dr O’Neil pushed the importance of rebuilding Australia’s capacity to teach Asian languages in schools particularly – “something that has collapsed in the past 10 years or so” – in order to boost language literacy and enhance the country’s ability to engage with the Asia-Pacific region. Associate Professor Slatter said her interest in housing issues was picked up in some of the central Summit ideas and she “would continue to make submissions to fill out the details on the housing proposals that were considered at the Summit”.

Peter Gill
Local initiatives, not ‘solutions’ imposed from afar, are the key to the future development of Indigenous communities, according to World Vision Chief executive, Reverend Tim Costello.

In the wake of Australia’s apology to the Stolen Generations, Rev Costello discussed the way ahead for Indigenous communities when he delivered the annual Lowitja O’Donoghue Oration in Adelaide last month.

Rev Costello told a large audience at the Oration – which was hosted by the Don Dunstan Foundation and co-sponsored by Flinders University – that the Federal Government’s apology had “turned the ship of state and given Australians a desire to bind up the wounds which the apology was in part responding to.” However, he indicated there was much work to be done.

“We have to challenge the status quo in Indigenous affairs, and from our experience, that is largely about the way that problems are conceptualised and solutions proffered,” Rev Costello said.

“There have always been many experts in Indigenous affairs, but the solutions they offer inevitably lead to another program which, in turn, exacerbates this complexity,” he said.

“It is important to start with the practical realities at the coalface of Indigenous affairs, otherwise policy solutions are fired into administrative vacuums: ideas without the capacity to implement them, and with little engagement of intended beneficiaries, are dumb ideas.

“If we can go beyond blaming individuals, religion, politics, culture, and so on, then maybe it is time to say that there is no solution, the system has become so overwhelmingly and hopelessly complex in its pursuit of finding the solution that it itself has become the problem. To the extent that the system is workable, it is in the capacity, innovation and adaptations that exist locally.

“There is an urgent need to understand the conditions of successful practice at the implementation coalface. This is the engine room of Indigenous affairs, not the rooms full of well-meaning people in Alice Springs and Canberra.”

Earlier, as he introduced Rev Costello, Flinders Vice-Chancellor, Professor Michael Barber, said “as a non-Aboriginal Australian, I can, of course, not fully appreciate the feeling that is passing through the hearts and minds of Aboriginal people” in relation to the apology and other contemporary events.

But Professor Barber added: “One of the values I am trying to encourage at Flinders is an ability for people to be comfortable crossing boundaries, be they social, cultural or ethnic boundaries.”

Expanding the discussion in cyberspace

Flinders staff, students and the general public can now engage with the latest research developments and debates with the launch of the Office of Research web blog last month.

Designed as a communication tool to keep people up to date with news and views within the University’s research community, the blog incorporates categories of information on various topics including news, grants and funding opportunities, and government policies.

A naming competition was held with responses sought from the University community with the winning entry bestowing the name ‘The ORB’ (Office of Research Blog) onto the system.

ORB designer and editor, Corey Wallis, told Flinders Journal that the ability to post comments on the blog is confined to members of the University community who have a FAN and password.

Mr Wallis said the Office of Research would monitor contributions to ensure consistency with the Blogs at Flinders acceptable comments policy which highlighted a requirement for only ‘civil comments’ to be posted and precluded spam comments, unsupported accusations or personal attacks.

Mr Wallis said the best way to understand the working of The ORB was to join the online conversation and try it via the link: http://blogs.flinders.edu.au/research
Contributing business expertise to Flinders

Sir Eric Neal, asked if she would be willing to share with Flinders the benefit of the extensive business network and community engagement experience she had acquired through her role as Chief Executive of her company Angus Clyne Australia.

With the introduction of Flinders Partners and Professor Michael Barber’s appointment as Vice-Chancellor, Ms Clyne believes Flinders is set for a new phase of growth and change.

Reports on non-confidential matters considered at the Council Meetings held on 1 May and 5 June can be found at: http://www.flinders.edu.au/about/governance/university-council/council-news.cfm

Emma Kibble

Talking with the animals

A poetry competition and a review of national and international animal laws are the first outcomes to be delivered from a new research partnership between the Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology at Flinders and Zoos SA.

The partnership, which was initiated by Professor Mark Israel from the School of Law, is aimed at bringing staff from both institutions together along common areas of interest with the goal of generating new cross-disciplinary research projects.

“Essentially, the idea is to take the natural relationship the University already has with Zoos SA and enhance it,” Professor Israel said. “Of course, there is an obvious link between the zoos and the more scientific areas of study, but what about cultural tourism, animal law, education and creative writing – surely there is potential for collaboration there as well?”

According to Professor Israel, the two projects that have already been developed through the partnership are excellent examples of what can be achieved when the traditional boundaries between disciplines are removed.

Firstly, staff from Zoos SA and the Department of English, Australian Studies and Creative Writing at Flinders will host an annual Zoopoetry competition, asking amateur poets to produce 20 lines of prose about a feature at one of Adelaide’s zoos (see side story).

Secondly, Lesley Petrie from the School of Law will conduct a review of the current codes of conduct relating to the treatment of animals in captivity by examining a range of animal laws around the country and internationally. Her findings and recommendations will be presented to the Chief Executive Officer of Zoos SA, Professor Chris West, later this year.

If the projects prove to be successful, Professor Israel said the Faculty would be keen to investigate the possibility of following a similar path with other cultural institutions across South Australia.

Emma Kibble

Calling writers

A unique competition will present aspiring poets and animal lovers alike with the opportunity to have their work featured in the re-developments of South Australia’s zoos.

Held by Flinders University and Zoos SA, the Zoopoetry competition is asking hopeful writers to submit a 20 line poem which will be displayed in new enclosures at both the Adelaide and Monarto zoos.

Open to all ages, entrants must provide an original poem that features one of two subjects - the Sumatran Tiger or the Monarto Zoo viewing platform.

Competition judge, Professor Jeri Kroll said the judges will be looking for a poem that communicates the essence of the subject and its surroundings.

“Aside from having their poems printed on the new enclosure signage, winning entrants will also receive a $200 cash prize and a Zoo pass. Highly commended entries will be published on the Zoos SA website and in Flinders University publications,” Professor Kroll said.

Winners will be announced in October at a Zoo function. All poems must be sent by Monday June 30th. For further information, visit the website at: www.adelaidezoo.com.au/files/12161pdf

Miranda McDonagh
A cultural monster mash

Monsters – and drama students – from two cultures have teamed up to present a new play that will have its world premiere at Okinawa’s annual Kijimuna Festival in July.

Six Flinders Drama Centre students will join six Japanese student actors in a performance of Once Upon a Midnight, a bilingual musical written by Flinders postgraduate student Alex Vickery-Howe. The overseas performance will also have a ‘return leg’ as part of Adelaide’s OzAsia Festival in September.

In finding themes that would interest audiences from both cultures, Mr Vickery-Howe settled on young people’s fascination with fantasy, magic and music as common points of reference.

The story follows the fortunes of Kelsey Clarke, the most paranoid and frightened child in the world.

“She’s scared of the dark, she’s scared of heights, she’s scared of everything,” Mr Vickery-Howe said.

After being lured into an underground world of monsters and dreams, Kelsey confronts and eventually overcomes her deepest fears.

The characterisation turns convention on its head, with a reformed, vegetarian vampire on the side of good, while a fairy godmother is exposed as the villain. Vickery-Howe also researched Japanese myths to find a cast of suitable monsters.

“As far as design goes, we’re going for a comic book, ‘manga’ kind of look,” Mr Vickery-Howe said. While the sets will be fairly simple, the costumes will be quite elaborate, and the show will be put together over four weeks of intensive rehearsal in Okinawa.

The songs and dialogue will be presented in Japanese and English. Mr Vickery-Howe said one disconcerting aspect of having his work translated was seeing entire lines of dialogue rendered into a single Japanese character.

Rehearsals will rely heavily on translators to convey the writer’s and the director’s intentions to the actors.

Mr Alex Vickery-Howe

“It will be a hard gap to bridge in some ways, and for research purposes I will be documenting every step of the process as we go,” Mr Vickery-Howe said.

Charles Gent

Poems off the shelf

Poets can always be located on the shelves in a library, but in the Sturt Campus library at Flinders you can find a living poet behind the Information Desk.

Deb Matthews-Zott, who is the University’s Nursing and Midwifery Liaison Librarian, recently published her second volume of poems, Slow Notes.

Ms Matthews-Zott, who has an honours Arts degree from Flinders, has been writing poetry for more than two decades; she won the CJ Dennis Prize for poetry in 1996 with her poem After the Fall and is a veteran of Adelaide’s Friendly Street readings.

The title of the collection – also the name of one of the poems – reflects recurrent musical images or metaphors that occur in the poems. Ms Matthews-Zott said the mood of the poems tends towards the meditative, often pursuing themes or ideas sparked by everyday experience. But humour and whimsy also have a role – one poem, Decipher Me, borrows from her hobby as an amateur radio operator, and is written in Morse code.

While images and initial ideas may come instantaneously and require jotting down on the spot, Ms Matthews-Zott said she can’t write poetry quickly, or to order.

“I find you can’t force a poem. It has to come when it’s ready, and it can have a long gestation, sometimes a couple of years,” she said.

Her next poetical project is an ambitious one: she is working on a cycle of poems on the theme of migration, set in Adelaide in the 1950s and 60s and written from a male point of view.

Slow Notes is published by Ginninderra Press, Adelaide, and can be ordered from www.ginninderrapress.com.au

Diary dates

FRIDAY, JUNE 20 2008
4.30pm – Friday at the Library, Noel Stockdale Room, Central Library. Book launch of Inside Muslim Minds by Professor Riaz Hassan. To be launched by Emeritus Professor Hugh Stretton.

SATURDAY, JUNE 21 2008
7pm – Music Concert, Function Centre. Flinders University Choral Society and the Flinders Chamber Ensemble combine in a program of Haydn’s Little Organ Mass and Schubert’s Missa Brevis. All welcome.

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