

**2395**

CITATIONS OF FOREIGN AND  
INTERNATIONAL LAW IN  
CONSTITUTIONAL DECISION-  
MAKING

University of Nebraska  
Lincoln, Nebraska  
Hruska Lecture 2009  
Tuesday September 22, 2009.

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA**

**LINCOLN, NEBRASKA**

**HRUSKA LECTURE 2009**

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2009**

**CITATIONS OF FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL LAW IN  
CONSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING\***

The Hon. Michael D. Kirby AC CMG\*\*

**RETURN OF AN ADMIRAL**

It is a great pleasure for me to return to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Years ago, the then Dean of the Law School, Harvey Perlman, visited Australia and I had the pleasure of welcoming him to my Chambers in Sydney. Soon afterwards (it may have been a coincidence), I was elevated to the High Court of Australia, the final national appellate and constitutional court of my country.

In April 2000, I came to Lincoln to deliver a lecture and Dean Perlman arranged for the Governor of Nebraska to appoint me an admiral of the Grand Navy of the State of Nebraska. My commission was to continue in force during good behaviour and the pleasure of the Chief Admiral. It has never been revoked. At the same time, I was admitted to the Phi Beta Delta Society for International Scholars.

---

\* Given at the University of Nebraska, September 22, 2009. Parts of this lecture draw on previous writings of the author including his Grotius Lecture for the American Society of International Law, Michael Kirby, *International Law – The Impact on National Constitutions*, 21 AM U INT’L L REV, 327 (2006) and also the author’s Hart Lecture at Georgetown University Law Center, Washington DC, April 16, 2009, and his Donahue Lecture at Suffolk University Law School, Boston, April 22, 2009 (forthcoming).

\*\* Formerly Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009), President of the International Commission of Jurists (1995-98); Honorary member of the American Law Institute (2003- ); Honorary Counselor of the American Society of International Law (2009-).

I return on this occasion at the invitation of Professor Perlman, now Chancellor of the University and with the friendly concurrence of Interim Dean of Law, Professor Anna Shavers. My purpose is to deliver a lecture named for the late United States Senator Roman L. Hruska. I acknowledge the long contribution that Senator Hruska made to public life in many State activities before his election first to the United States House of Representatives and then to the Senate. He was elected to the Senate in 1954 and re-elected three times before his retirement in 1976.

Amongst Senator Hruska's generous benefactions was one that helped inaugurate the Roman L. Hruska Institute for the Administration of Justice, a joint initiative of the Law School, the Nebraska State Bar Foundation with the Federal Bar Association. The purpose of the Institute is to educate lawyers, law students and the public in Nebraska about the importance of the administration of justice in this country, particularly at the federal level.

I am proud to participate in the Hruska lecture series. I do so in succession to respected colleagues and friends on the Supreme Court of the United States, Justices Kennedy, Ginsburg and Breyer. Justice Breyer will be at the Yale Law School this week where I will be participating with him, and with other judges of final courts, in the annual constitutionalism seminar, organised by that Faculty. I take the theme of this Hruska Lecture from the character of this annual event.

Increasingly today, judges find that issues arising before them in national courts are often very similar to issues that have earlier been addressed in the courts of different jurisdictions. Obviously, the law (especially the constitutional law) of other places is not the same as one's own law. Yet an increasing number of judges around the world are finding it useful to consider the way others have faced like problems. They always make due adjustment for the differences in the constitutional text and other laws, and for disparities

of history, culture, legal tradition and social attitudes. Reaching out to international and transnational law for the guidance in addressing local problems, is a feature of the current age. It is as natural as the sharing of knowledge through the internet, the sharing of technology through the miracle of flight that brings me here from Australia; and the sharing of the human aspiration to build a safe, just and peaceful world.

To some extent, the sharing of decisional law and other sources has arisen because of common expressions that exist in the post-independence constitutions of so many former colonies, several of which have borrowed approaches from the Constitution of the United States of America. My own country, Australia, did so in its federal Constitution of 1901. So we quite often look to how the United States courts have tackled shared problems. However, apart from this, two countries, by and large, have held out from the general use of international and national law of other countries in constitutional adjudication. Those countries are the United States of America and Australia. The strength of the feeling that exists in the United States on this issue may be seen in some of the questions asked, and responses sought, in the recent confirmation hearings of Justice Sonia Sotomayor<sup>1</sup>, for the Supreme Court of the United States. Repeatedly, she was pressed on her attitude to the creative role of a judge; on the utilisation of foreign legal materials; and on the relevance of her own background in reaching her decisions, as a Latina who had earlier known economic and social disadvantage. It was Roscoe Pound who first taught Americans (and their cousins in Australia) of the diversity of influences upon judicial decision-making and of realism that required an acknowledgement of the same. So this lecture is about characteristics and modernity in the discharge of the judicial function in the age of cyberspace, nuclear fission, the human genome, biotechnology and the other realities of the world we live in.

---

<sup>1</sup> WASHINGTON POST, August 26, 2009 A13.

## UNITED STATES CASE LAW

The suggestion that it is legitimate for national judges, construing their own constitutional charters of rights, to have regard for any lessons that may lie in the treatment of similar or analogous problems in other jurisdictions, would not be regarded as strongly contestable (or even controversial) in most countries of the common law today. In the United States of America and Australia, for some similar and some different reasons, strong opinions have been expressed antagonistic to any such references to foreign material in construing the provisions of the national constitution. The attitude has been evident in the United States, in respect of Bill of Rights provisions, even where, as in the case forbidding “cruel and unusual punishments”<sup>2</sup>, this expression was itself derived from the English Bill of Rights and was later adapted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>3</sup> and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>4</sup>.

In the United States, a series of decisions involving constitutional questions, in which Justices of the Supreme Court have referred to provisions of international and foreign law, in explaining their conclusions, occasioned such an antagonistic response from other members of the Court, both in their reasons<sup>5</sup> and in extra-curial writing<sup>6</sup>, that a large public explosion of vituperation occurred. This was directed at the allegedly foreign law-friendly Justices, culminating both in reported death threats directed at some of them and even the introduction of purported legislation, designed to make it an impeachable offense for a federal judge to base a decision on foreign law<sup>7</sup>. Thus, section 201 of the proposed Constitution Restoration Act states:

---

<sup>2</sup> US CONSTITUTION, Amdt. VIII

<sup>3</sup> UDHR, Art 5 (“No-one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”).

<sup>4</sup> ICCPR, Art 7 (in the same terms as Art 5 of UDHR).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Roper v Simmons* 125 S.Ct. 1183, 1200 at 1226 (2005) per Scalia J.

<sup>6</sup> Justice A. Scalia *Romancing the Constitution: Interpretation as Invention* in G. Hushcroft and I. Brodie (eds.) *CONSTITUTIONALISM IN THE CHARTER ERA* (London) LexisNexis, 2004, 341

<sup>7</sup> Constitution Restoration Act of 2004; HR 3799; 108<sup>th</sup> Cong.§ 201 (204); Constitution Restoration Act of 2005 S 520; 109<sup>th</sup> Cong.§ 201 (2005). The death threats were described in Charles Lane, “Ginsburg Faults GOP Critics, Cites a Threat from ‘Fringe’” in *WASHINGTON POST*, March 17, 2006, p.A3.

“In interpreting and applying the Constitution of the United States, a court of the United States may not rely upon any constitution, law, administrative rule, executive order, directive, policy, judicial decisions or any other action of any foreign state or international organisation or agency, other than the constitutional law and English common law”.

Commenting on this Bill, A United States Senior District Judge has observed<sup>8</sup>:

“Aside from its grammatical incompetencies, the proposed Act does not define what it means by ‘constitutional law’ and ‘English common law’. ... As for the English common law, one would need to tread softly. Most American States included within their constitutions or statutes a provision that the common law that can be considered of full force stops as of March 24, 1607: the day the last ship sailed from England to what would become the lost colony of Jamestown, Virginia. I would dare not cite the Statute of Frauds which was enacted by the British parliament in 1677. A host of other precedents, such as the McNaghten Case, would be swept away from the American lexicon. I think the point is made that this proposed statute is utterly stupid. In the unlikely event that Congress would enact [it], it would not be enforceable and the first court to review it would likely strike it down without having to rely on any foreign law.

[Beyond] the xenophobic blindness of this proposed legislation, a more insidious danger lurks. We cannot afford to ignore outrageous demonstrations of ignorance such as the canard that the Holocaust never happened nor the instant one which presumes that the fundamental law of the United States can be understood without reference to the history of western civilisation.”

The decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States in which strong exchanges have occurred between the participating Justices over the references to foreign and international law in constitutional adjudication

---

<sup>8</sup> Judge John Kane, *International Law from the Trial Judge’s Vantage Point* 35 DENVER JOURNAL OF INT. LAW & POLICY 379 at 386 (2007)

include *Atkins v. Virginia*<sup>9</sup>, *Lawrence v. Texas*<sup>10</sup> and *Roper v. Simmons*<sup>11</sup>. As these decisions are recent and familiar, I will not repeat them or revisit their content once again<sup>12</sup>.

Because of my own sexuality I naturally read, with the closest attention, the decision of the Supreme Court in *Lawrence*. That was a decision, reversing the earlier holding of the Court in *Bowers v. Hardwick*<sup>13</sup>. The Supreme Court in *Lawrence* invalidated a Texan law criminalizing sodomy between adults of the same sex even if consenting and in private. The *Lawrence* court not only overruled *Bowers*. It declared that the decision had been wrong when decided. No mention had been made in the *Bowers* opinion to the decision of the European Court of Human Rights, issued five years earlier in *Dudgeon v. United Kingdom*<sup>14</sup>. That decision had rejected similar statutory prohibitions in the law of the United Kingdom applicable in Northern Ireland. The European Court held that such laws constituted a violation of the right to privacy guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. The assertion by the majority of the Supreme Court in *Bowers* that the sodomy law reflected ancient and universal values of civilised states would have been at least subjected to some doubt and heightened scrutiny if a reference to the then recent decision of the European Court had been made and considered.

Writing for the Supreme Court in *Lawrence*, Justice Kennedy took note of the European Court's decision, declaring<sup>15</sup>:

“To the extent *Bowers* relied on values we share with the wider civilisation, it should be noted that the reasoning and holding in *Bowers* has been rejected elsewhere. The European Court of Human Rights has

---

<sup>9</sup> 536 US 304 (2002)

<sup>10</sup> 539 US 558 (2003)

<sup>11</sup> 125 S.Ct. 1183 (2005)

<sup>12</sup> See the writer's Grotius Lecture for the American Society of International Law: Michael Kirby, *International Law: The Impact on National Constitutions* 21 AM.U.INT'L.REV. 327 (2006)

<sup>13</sup> 478 US 186 (1986)

<sup>14</sup> (1981) 45 Eur.Ct.HR 41; (1982) 4 EUR.HUM.RTS.REP. 149

<sup>15</sup> 539 US 558 at 578-579 per Kennedy J. The “living tree” approach to constitutional interpretation has a long history. See e.g. *Edwards v. Canada (Attorney-General)* [1930] AC 124 136 (PC).

followed not *Bowers*, but its own decision in *Dudgeon v United Kingdom*, *Modinos v Cyprus* [and] *Norris v. Ireland*.”

At the conclusion of his opinion for the Court in *Lawrence*, Justice Kennedy eloquently went on to explain how the concepts expressed in the United States Constitution have themselves evolved, just as the modern standards of decency and justice do in every civilised country:

“Had those who drew and ratified the Due Process Clauses of the Fifth Amendment or the Fourteenth Amendment known the components of liberty in its manifold possibilities, they might have been more specific. They did not presume to have this insight. They knew times can blind us to certain truths and later generations can see that laws once thought necessary and proper in fact serve only to oppress. As the constitution endures, persons in every generation can invoke its principles in their own search for greater freedom.”

Reasoning of this kind produced not only strong reactions in the Congress and various civic groups. It also elicited extremely angry words from judicial dissenters. Thus, in *Lawrence*, Justice Scalia complained<sup>16</sup> that the “Court has taken sides in the culture war, departing from its role of serving, as neutral observer, that the democratic rules of engagement are observed. [It is] a product of a law-profession culture [that has] largely signed on to the so-called homosexual agenda”. In *Roper v. Simmons*, Justice Scalia again expressed his contrary opinion powerfully<sup>17</sup>:

“[T]he basic premise of the Court’s argument – that American law should conform to the laws of the rest of the world – ought to be rejected out of hand.”

---

<sup>16</sup> 539 US 558 at 602-3 per Scalia J (dissenting).

<sup>17</sup> 125 S.Ct. 1183, 1226 (2005) per Scalia J (dissenting). See also *Romer v Evans* 517 US 620,636 per Scalia J (dissenting)



Foreign readers of these exciting exchanges might conclude that the more temperate views of the majority Justices had the better of the argument. Thus, in *Roper*, Justice Kennedy remarked<sup>18</sup>:

“The opinion of the world community, while not controlling our outcome, does provide respected and significant confirmation for our own conclusions.”

Justice O’Connor, whilst dissenting and herself more cautious about the use of foreign law, was defensive about its occasional utility<sup>19</sup>:

“[W]e should not be surprised to find congruence between domestic and international values ... expressed in international law or in the domestic laws of individual countries.

The fact remains that, after the sharp exchanges in the Supreme Court and in the Congress up to 2005, the reliance upon foreign and international legal materials in constitutional decisions of the Supreme Court appears to have receded. Perhaps no-one thought that any foreign analogies presented to the Court were sufficiently close and useful to warrant their mention. This would seem surprising when it is remembered that the Court has had to grapple during the past four years with important questions of fundamental principle and values in a number of cases involving detainees in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

Perhaps those Justices who are inclined to inform their minds about reasoning on common problems, expressed in foreign courts and tribunals, have noticed the fuss that such citations commonly cause in the Court, in the Congress and in sections of society of this country and decided, instead, to accept Justice Scalia’s advice to Justice Breyer in their public conversation. This was to the effect that it was alright for Justice Breyer, to inform himself on international

---

<sup>18</sup> 125 S.Ct. 1183 at 1200 per Kennedy J.

<sup>19</sup> 125 S.Ct. 1183 at 1212 per O’Connor J (dissenting)

legal developments but he should just “keep it out of his opinions”<sup>20</sup>. For some judges, such a course might seem to be a path of prudence and wisdom. For others, it might seem a surrender to intellectual dishonesty and a departure from decisional transparency.

## **AUSTRALIAN CASE LAW**

If United States lawyers are now missing the emotion of the judicial exchanges over this subject, they have only to transfer their attention to Australian case law. Parallel judicial interchanges have taken place in Australia, including in recent times. Sharing, as we do, the same attributes of a common judicial system, discursive reasoning; dissenting opinions; and robust interchange, many of the debates in the United States, recounted above, have resonances with those that have occurred in the High Court of Australia.

In 2004, the High Court of Australia was required to decide whether the provisions of the Migration Act 1958 (Aust.) authorised the indefinite detention, without judicial order, of an illegal migrant, and, if so, whether such an enactment was constitutionally valid. A majority upheld the government’s interpretation of the Act, concluding that, in the circumstances, the Act required the detention of Mr. Ahmed Al-Kateb indefinitely. On this point, the Court was divided 4:3<sup>21</sup>. The Act contained a provision that envisaged that an illegal migrant in detention could terminate the incarceration immediately by requesting the Minister to return him or her to the country of nationality. The problem arose because Mr. Al-Kateb was a stateless Palestinian. Kuwait, where he had been born, would not receive him. Israel would not permit him to pass through its territory to Gaza. There was no other access. No other country would accept him. On the face of the Minister’s submission, Mr. Al-Kateb could be kept forever in the Womera Detention Camp in the middle of Australia. The minority Justices concluded that such an interpretation should not be attributed to the Act, given that a basic postulate of the Act, envisaged

---

<sup>20</sup> *The Relevance of Foreign Legal Materials in United States Constitutional Cases: A Conversation Between Justice Antonin Scalia and Justice Stephen Breyer* 3 INT’L J CONST.L Const.L 519 at 534 (2005).

<sup>21</sup> Per McHugh, Hayne, Callinan and Heydon JJ; Gleeson CJ, Gummow and Kirby JJ dissenting.

by its terms, could not be fulfilled as the Act contemplated in the particular case.

The majority went on to hold that the result that they favored was not inconsistent with the Australian Constitution. That Constitution evinces the purest form of federal democratic governance. There is no general bill of rights. The founders rejecting the American model, in this respect, because they believed that Parliament could always be trusted to protect the rights of the people. This, Americans will remember, was the initial reaction of James Madison to the request that he draft a Bill of Rights for the United States. Mr. Al-Kateb's constitutional objection in Australia had therefore to be framed in terms of a suggested intrusion by the legislature into territory reserved by the Constitution to the Judicature (Ch III), on the footing that long-term (and certainly indefinite) detention had to be subjected to judicial scrutiny. The majority dismissed this argument. But Justice Gummow and I would have upheld it: *Al-Kateb v. Godwin*<sup>22</sup>.

A passing observation by me to the effect that the judicial chapter of the Australian Constitution should be construed today, so far as possible and consistently with the text, so as to conform with the principles of international human rights law, which demanded the subjection of prolonged deprivation of individual liberty to judicial supervision<sup>23</sup>, drew an extended coda from Justice Michael McHugh, the senior Justice of the Court after the Chief Justice. With reference to Australian and foreign authority and to history and arguments of legal principle, he declared that my invocation of international law in resolving the purely Australian constitutional question was impermissible, unsustainable and legally heretical<sup>24</sup>:

“[C]ontrary to the view of Kirby J, courts cannot read the Constitution by reference to the provisions of international law that have become accepted since the Constitution was enacted in 1900. Rules of

---

<sup>22</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 611-613 [135]-[146] per Gummow J (dissenting); (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 615 [146] per Kirby J (dissenting).

<sup>23</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 512 at 616 [150] per Kirby J (dissenting).

<sup>24</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 589 per McHugh J.

international law at that date might in some cases throw some light on the meaning of a constitutional provision. ... [But] the claim that the Constitution should be read consistently with the rules of international law has been decisively rejected by members of this court on several occasions. As a matter of constitutional doctrine, it must be regarded as heretical. ... [R]eading the Constitution up or down to conform to the *rules* of international law is to make those rules part of the Constitution, contrary to the direction in s 128 that the Constitution is to be amended only in accordance with the referendum process. ... It is even more difficult to accept that the Constitution's meaning is affected by rules created by the agreements and practices of other countries. If that were the case, judges would have to have a 'loose-leaf' copy of the Constitution. If Australia is to have a Bill of Rights, it must be done in the constitutional way – hard though its achievement may be – by persuading the people to amend the Constitution by inserting such a Bill”.

In my reasons, I rejected the arguments of Justice McHugh, proceeding through the same authorities and examining the approaches adopted in other countries. Specifically, I rejected the suggestion that what was involved was the application of “rules” of international law rather than an “interpretative principle” for the reading of the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION in today’s world. In that world, any nation’s constitution must necessarily operate in a context profoundly affected by the growing body of international law<sup>25</sup>. The role of both formal amendment and of judicial re-interpretation, in the ongoing evolution of the constitutional text was emphasised by me<sup>26</sup>, including the many cases in which, by re-interpretation, Justice McHugh had himself made distinguished contributions to new understandings of that text<sup>27</sup>. I suggested<sup>28</sup>:

“[T]he willingness of national constitutional courts to look outside their own domestic legal traditions to the elaboration of international, regional and other bodies represents a paradigm shift that has happened in municipal law in recent years. There are many illustrations

---

<sup>25</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 623 [173] per Kirby J (dissenting).

<sup>26</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 625 [179] per Kirby J (dissenting).

<sup>27</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 625-6 [180] per Kirby J (dissenting).

<sup>28</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 727 [185] per Kirby J (dissenting) (footnotes omitted).

in the decisions of the courts of, for example, Canada, Germany, India, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States”.

As to the last, I noted the similar debates which had arisen in the Supreme Court of the United States in *Atkins v. Virginia* and *Lawrence v. Texas* (also *Grutter v. Bollinger*<sup>29</sup>). I concluded<sup>30</sup>:

“... [O]pinions that seek to cut off contemporary Australian law (including constitutional law) from the persuasive force of international law are doomed to fail. They will be seen in the future much as the reasoning of Taney CJ in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*<sup>31</sup>, Black J in *Korematsu v [v. United States]*<sup>32</sup> ... are now viewed: with a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment. The dissents of McLean J<sup>33</sup> and Curtis J<sup>34</sup> in *Dred Scott* strongly invoked international law to support the proposition that the appellant was not a slave but a free man. Had the interpretative principle prevailed at that time, the United States Supreme Court might have been saved a serious error of constitutional reasoning; and much injustice, indifference to human indignity and later suffering might have been avoided. The fact is that it is often helpful for national judges to check their own constitutional thinking against principles expressing the rules of a ‘wider civilisation’<sup>35</sup>.”

American readers, observing these sharp exchanges in the Australian court, should note that, whilst there was disagreement about the suggested use to be made of international law, no-one questioned the legitimacy and utility of referring to the reasoning of the United States judges, as that reasoning threw light on the meaning of the Australian constitutional text. This is something that is done all the time. In part, it is done because of the power of analogies and, in part, because some features of the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION (like

---

<sup>29</sup> 539 US 306 at 344 (2003) per Ginsberg J. See also *Al-Kateb* (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 627 [186], fn. 294 per Kirby J.

<sup>30</sup> (2004) 219 CLR 562 at 629 [190]

<sup>31</sup> 60 US 593 (1856).

<sup>32</sup> 323 US 214 (1944)

<sup>33</sup> *Dred Scott* 60 US 393 at 534, 556-557 (1856)

<sup>34</sup> 60 US 393 at 594-597, 601 (1856).

<sup>35</sup> A reference to the reasons of Kennedy J in *Lawrence* 539 US 558 at 576 (2003)

those of many other later written constitutions) were borrowed from the American template and are shared with other countries.

Although, in *Al-Kateb*, the view propounded by me was a minority one, as it has been on other earlier<sup>36</sup> and later<sup>37</sup> occasions, shortly before my retirement from the High Court of Australia a case arose which may indicate a shift in the tectonic plates. I refer to *Roach v. Electoral Commissioner*<sup>38</sup>.

That was a case which involved a challenge by a prisoner to the constitutional validity of a federal enactment depriving all prisoners of the right to vote in the then forthcoming federal election, held in November 2007. Before a 2006 amendment to federal legislation, prisoners serving three years or more in prison were disqualified from voting in federal elections but shorter-term prisoners could vote. Indeed, under Australian electoral arrangements, they were required to vote, in discharge of their civic duty because casting a vote is compulsory in Australia. No express provision in the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION governed the validity of the amending law. No Bill of Rights provision applied to resolve the point. From colonial times, longer term prisoners, attainted of treason and other grave crimes, were disqualified from voting. The issue for the High Court of Australia was whether the detailed scheme for an elected representative democracy, as provided in the Constitution, rendered *total* disenfranchisement of *all* prisoners invalid. If they could be so disqualified, could Parliament restore the disqualifications that once existed in England for all Roman Catholics? Or that had earlier existed in Australia for Aboriginals? Could all Asian citizens be disqualified as a group? And if not, why not?

The challenger pressed upon the Court developments that had occurred resolving like questions both in Canada under the country's Charter<sup>39</sup> and in

---

<sup>36</sup> e.g. *Newcrest Mining (WA) Ltd v Commonwealth of Australia* (1997) 190 CLR 513 at 657-658, 661.

<sup>37</sup> e.g. *Thomas v Mowbray* (2007) 233 CLR 307 at 442 [384].

<sup>38</sup> (2007) 233 CLR 162.

<sup>39</sup> *Sauvé v Canada (Chief Electoral Officer)* [2002] 3 SCR 519 at 585 [119].

the European Court of Human Rights in respect of the United Kingdom<sup>40</sup>. The citation of these authorities was regarded by the government lawyers as provocative. The Solicitor-General urged that all such foreign law should be disregarded as immaterial to the meaning of the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION. This irrelevance rested, he declared, upon the principle that the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION placed its trust in the Federal Parliament and rendered it accountable to the electors if they considered that the trust was abused. Of course, the notion that the electors would rise in wrath to defend the civic rights to electoral participation of prisoners appeared a trifle ethereal, in the real world of Australian politics. If anyone would defend such rights, it had to be the Court.

Nonetheless, a reflection of the governmental submission was accepted by Justice Heydon in his dissenting opinion. This was published with the reasons of the majority who upheld, in part, the prisoner's challenge. In effect, the Court majority disallowed the 2006 amendment to the Electoral Act. It thereby restored the previous law confining the disqualification to prisoners serving three year terms or more. In terms of the text of the AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION, this conclusion was explained by reference to the three year electoral cycle provided for the election of the Australian House of Representatives. Disqualification of prisoners serving a lesser sentence would be disproportional to the power proposed in Parliament to enact statutory disqualifications. Each of the opinions in support of the majority conclusion (by Chief Justice Gleeson<sup>41</sup> and jointly by Justice Gummow, Crennan and myself<sup>42</sup>), referred without embarrassment to the Canadian and European case law, whilst insisting that such law was not directly applicable and needed adaptation for any relevance to the Australian text.

---

<sup>40</sup> Hirst v United Kingdom [No.2] (2005) 42 EHRR 41.

<sup>41</sup> (2007) 233 CLR 162 at 177-179 [13]-[19] per Gleeson CJ.

<sup>42</sup> (2007) 233 CLR 162 at 203 [100] per Gummow, Kirby and Crennan JJ.

This approach was still unacceptable to Justice Heydon, who, with Justice Hayne, dissented. Something of the flavor of recent American dissents can be observed in his reasons<sup>43</sup>:

“It is ... surprising that the plaintiff submitted that [her] arguments were ‘strongly supported’ by decisions under the [ICCPR, European Convention on Human Rights, the Canadian Charter and the Constitution of South Africa] ‘which found that prisoner disenfranchisement provisions were invalid’. It is surprising because these instruments can have nothing whatever to do with the construction of the Australian Constitution. These instruments did not influence the framers of the Constitution, for they all post-date it by many years. It is highly improbable that it had any influence on them. The language they employ is radically different. One of the instruments is a treaty to which Australia is not and could not be a party. Another ... is a treaty to which Australia is a party, but the plaintiff relied for its construction on comments by the United Nations Human Rights Committee. If Australian law permitted reference to materials of that kind as an aid to construing the Constitution, it might be thought that the process of assessing the significance of what the committee did would be assisted by knowing which countries were on the committee at the relevant times; what the names and standing of the representatives of these countries were; what influence, if any, Australia had on the Committee’s deliberations; and indeed whether Australia was given any significant opportunity to be heard. The plaintiff’s submissions did not deal with these points. But the fact is that our law does not permit recourse to these materials. The proposition that the legislative power of the Commonwealth is affected or limited by developments in international law since 1900 is denied by most, though not all, of the relevant authorities – that is denied by 21 of the Justices of this Court who have considered the matter, and affirmed by only one.”

The “only one” referred to in the footnote was myself. The sharp language in which this disagreement was expressed suggests that the persistence of the majority in the citation of international law materials was deliberate. Certainly, it could not be said that it was offered in oversight of the feelings

---

<sup>43</sup> (2007) 233 CLR 162 at 224-225 [181] per Heydon J (citations omitted).



that such citations appear to stir up in those of the contrary persuasion, whether in Australia or in the United States.

### **THE CONCERN OF NATIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM**

Inevitably, the foregoing analysis brings scholars and judges face to face with the essential reasons that lie behind the vehement rejection of foreign legal materials, by learned judges and commentators<sup>44</sup>. One of these considerations is, I suggest, relevant to the United States, although it is not of much relevance to the thinking of Australian opponents. The other is a consideration that lies at the heart of the objections in both countries. It is by no means meritless, although, in my view, it is not controlling.

The consideration that is particular to the United States is a notion of a special American exceptionalism, so far as international law is concerned. Over the two and a quarter centuries of the history of the United States of America that notion has had to compete with the alternative notion, stated in 1900 in the decision of the Supreme Court in *The Paquete Habana*<sup>45</sup> in these well-known terms:

“International law is part of our law, and must be ascertained and administered by the courts of justice of appropriate jurisdiction as often as questions of right depending upon it are duly presented for their determination. For this purpose, where there is no treaty, and no controlling or executive or legislative act or judicial decision, resort must be had to the customs and usages of civilised nations ...”

As Professor Harold Koh of the Yale Law School has pointed out<sup>46</sup>, in the earliest days of the Republic, the United States was reliant upon the support

---

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Richard Posner, *Could I Interest You In Some Foreign Law? No Thanks, We Already Have our Own Laws*, LEGAL AFF., July-Aug. 2004, at 40, 41; James Allan, *Portia Bassanio or Dick the Butcher? Constraining Judges in the 21 Century* (2006) 17 KINGS COLLEGE LAW JL 1; Ken I Kersch, *Multilateralism Comes To The Courts* THE PUBLIC INTEREST, Winter 2004, 3.

<sup>45</sup> 175 US 677 at 708 (1900)

<sup>46</sup> Harold Hongju Koh *International Law As Part Of Our Law* 98 AMJ INT’L LAW 43, 47 (2004). See also Harold Hongju Koh, *On American Exceptionalism* 55 STAN.L.REV 1479 at 1482 (2003)

and good opinion of civilised countries that supported it against its enemies. Its engagement with the world has continued intermittently ever since. It has witnessed great periods of moral, intellectual and legal leadership in the world. Especially so during and after the Second World War when the new world legal order was created in the United Nations Organisation and when the international law of human rights was constructed, based substantially on notions derived from the Anglo-American legal tradition.

Yet intertwined with this engagement with the world there has always been a notion of exceptionalism – isolationism and hostility or indifference to aspects of international law which is thought to cut across United States' laws and interests. And the determination to achieve the protection of those interests, if necessary alone, by the United States, currently the most powerful nation on earth. A striking instance of this latter attitude may be found in a document published by the White House in September 2001, asserting the right of the United States to take pre-emptive action against terrorists<sup>47</sup>:

“While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting pre-emptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country.”

The Australian scholar Owen Harries has identified American “exceptionalism” as a feature of United States policy in recent years. He concludes that “the really interesting and important debate is not between anti-Americans and pro-Americans; it is between two different American traditions concerning how the United States can best promote its values and ideals”<sup>48</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> United States, *The National Strategy of the United States of American* (White House, Washington, September 2001).

<sup>48</sup> O. Harries quoted SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, December 12, 2003, 5<sup>th</sup> Boyer Lecture 2003 published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 2004.

The Australian government has also occasionally been given to adopting exceptionalist policies. For example, these have involved excluding parts of continental and political Australia from the “migration zone” within which refugee applicants may claim asylum in Australia and also well-known circumstances invoking obligations under international law in respect of persons rescued on the high seas and thereafter seeking access to Australian territorial waters<sup>49</sup>. Australian exceptionalism does not matter greatly, whereas that of the United States matters a lot and tends to affect the whole world. Occasionally, when reading of the intolerance of American and (fewer) Australian judges and lawyers to the citation, reference to, and use of, foreign law in constitutional adjudication, one cannot escape the impression that national exceptionalism is creeping into the law and the courts. It is here that we see the unfriendly face of legal nationalism, self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction. These are the attitudes of fortress America and fortress Australia. They have made several appearances in both countries in recent years.

There is a particular reason why this fortress attitude is much less successful, and therefore less worrying, in the case of Australia than in the United States. Until very recently, 1986 to be exact<sup>50</sup>, the Australian legal system and its Judicature were institutionally tied into the world-wide system supervised by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. That link (which excluded only a limited category of constitutional cases in Australia<sup>51</sup>), instilled in all Australian lawyers a generally comfortable attitude towards the use of inter-jurisdictional comparative law, as much in constitutional and public law as in cases involving questions of private law. The global linkage so established had its downside. However, one of its undoubted advantages was that it rescued its beneficiaries from narrow parochialism; set high standards of logical judicial reasoning; discouraged and corrected any corrupt or incompetent decisions; and promoted a global view of law and of the relevance of international law.

---

<sup>49</sup> Michael White, *Tampa Incident: Shipping, International and Maritime Legal Issues* (2004) 78 AUST’N LJ 101 (a reference to the rescue of 433 asylum seekers rescued by The Tampa, August 26, 2001. See also PUBLIC LAW REVIEW (2002) 13(2) 85.

<sup>50</sup> AUSTRALIA ACT 1986 (Aust. & UK), s 11.

<sup>51</sup> AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION, s 74.

With the decline of the British Empire, the jurisdiction of the Privy Council has receded almost to nothing. By chance, the last Australian appeal to the Privy Council was from a decision of the New South Wales Court of Appeal in which I presided, twenty years ago<sup>52</sup>. The appeal was dismissed.

In the place of the Privy Council, the successor final courts in virtually all of the fifty-three countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, now have the last word on the meaning of their respective constitutions and the content of their local laws. Nonetheless, an examination of the decisions of those final courts, long after the formal institutional links to the Privy Council have been severed, evidences a continuing, unembarrassed reference, in all of them, to decisions of final and intermediate courts in other Commonwealth countries.

To demonstrate that this is so, I need do no more than take the latest volume of the LAW REPORTS OF THE COMMONWEALTH<sup>53</sup>. The volume is full of public law cases, mostly concerned with constitutional law. Many of the cases deal with issues that are highly sensitive in their own national context, such as the apostasy case in Malaysia: *Joy v. Federal Territory Islamic Council & Ors.*<sup>54</sup>; the jurisdiction of the High Court in Ghana<sup>55</sup>; the constitutional validity of mandatory minimum sentences for rape in Botswana<sup>56</sup>; and the response to the problem of a sleeping judge in Australia<sup>57</sup>.

A common feature of each of these and the other cases in the volume is the wealth of reference, in elucidating constitutional provisions and clarifying contested issues of public law, to what is done in other Commonwealth courts,

---

<sup>52</sup> *Austin v Keele* (1987) 61 AUST.LJ REPS. 605 (PC).

<sup>53</sup> [2009] 1 LAW REPORTS OF THE COMMONWEALTH (Gen.ed.s. J.S. Read and P.E. Slinn (LexisNexis Butterworths, London))

<sup>54</sup> [2009] 1 LRC 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Republic v Fast Track High Court Accra; Ex parte Commission on Human Rights & Administrative Justice* [2009] 1 LRC 44.

<sup>56</sup> *State v Mathlo* [2009] 1 LRC 133.

<sup>57</sup> *R v Cessan* [2009] 1 LRC 416

courts in Europe and also courts of the United States. Thus, in the apostasy decision in Malaysia, there are thirteen citations of United Kingdom judicial authority; four from the Indian Supreme Court; and one from the High Court of Australia. In the Ghana case, there are eleven United Kingdom citations, two from South Africa and one each from Canada and the United States. Decisions of the Supreme Court of India in the volume contain numerous references to the decisions of the United Kingdom and Australian courts. The reports of the opinions of the National Court of Papua New Guinea refer to United Kingdom, Australian and Irish decisions. In the Australian sleeping judge case, the opinion of Chief Justice French is replete with citations from other lands with similar problems: notably the United States. No fewer than thirteen such American decisions on the problem are noted, from both federal and state courts. This is done without embarrassment, self-consciousness or recrimination. It is a feature of a mature legal system which, for nearly 200 years, has been sharing judicial decisions across the world, including in very sensitive, local constitutional decision-making. This is a confident, comparativist outlook that the United States lost following the national judicial and legal self-sufficiency that occurred in this country, after the Revolution.

Perhaps in the future, a similarly mature attitude may be accepted in the United States. The key to doing so is to realise that decisions of foreign courts, tribunals and other bodies and the content of international and regional law, outside one's own legal system, are not studied because they provide a binding *rule* that governs a municipal case and determines its outcome. They offer no more than a contextual setting that helps the municipal decision-maker to see his or her problem in a wider context. And to check local reasoning by reference to the discursive elaborations of judges and other decision-makers operating in a different system of law, making proper allowance for what will usually be distinct rules that the others are applying.

### **CONCERN ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT**

There remains, however, the democratic deficit. This is an objection common to the hesitation of United States and Australian jurists when analogies to the

resolution of a municipal law problem are propounded with reference to the principles of foreign or international law as expressed in courts, tribunals and other bodies outside the judicature of the nation state.

Professor Frank Michelman, in a moving tribute to Justice William Brennan's writings on democracy<sup>58</sup>, has remarked:

“American constitutional theory has over its life span been hounded and pre-occupied, if not totally consumed, by a search for harmony between what are usually heard as two clashing commitments: constitutionalism and democracy. ... Do we see some slight to democracy, some ‘Counter-Majoritarian Difficulty’ to recall Professor Bickel’s famous phrase, in unelected judges deciding the legal validity of the enactments of popular assemblies and thereby effectively ruling the country?”

In the context of the present subject matter, this question can be broadened. “Do we see a [particular] Counter-Majoritarian Difficulty” in those potential judicial rulers resolving cases by reference to the international law, which does not have the legitimacy of democratic endorsement by anyone, unless it be the officials of the nation states who approved the principles or (much more indirectly) the legislators who gave advice and consent to approve a treaty, although not actually enacting it as part of the substantive law of the land? Do we feel a particular sense of disquiet in their doing so, especially, in that most political, national and sensitive a document – the Constitution – which, of its nature, is designed to channel the institutions of popular democracy that grow out of the history and culture of a particular people in a given part of the world’s surface?

This is not an entirely theoretical issue. As Dean Alfred Aman of Suffolk University Law School has pointed out, in his 2004 monograph *THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT*<sup>59</sup>, the problem of the democratic deficit extends far

---

<sup>58</sup> F.I. Michelman, *Brennan and Democracy*, 86 CALIFORNIA L.REV. 399 at 399 (1998)

<sup>59</sup> A.C. Aman Jr., *THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT: TAMING GLOBALISATION THROUGH LAW REFORM* (NYU Press, 2004, New York)

beyond the incorporation of international law in judicial reasoning. Most acutely, it is presented by the chilling effect on representative democracy that has arisen since markets came to be called upon to do some of the work that governments in the past traditionally used to perform, in ways answerable to a political process. The world-wide moves towards privatisation of governmental services have many implications to be resolved; not least in consequence of the 2009 global economic downturn. Dean Aman correctly poses the question whether citizens, organised in the nation state, can influence, even if they cannot control, private sector organisations that now play an increasing role in the world? Some large transnational corporations are much wealthier and more powerful than many poorer nation states. How can democratic impulses be brought to bear upon them? Finally, how can such impulses influence the outcomes of international meetings where, with compromises, back-room deals and power politics at an ultra-elite level, texts are hammered out that are later propounded as expressing “universal principles” of international law?

Concern about the comparative lack of democratic input into the content of international law is understandable and reasonable. Anyone who has actually participated, as I have, in the development of international law will know that the input of popular and local opinions is minimal and, at best, theoretical and a legal fiction. Writing of the influence of democratic values on law-making in the United States, Professor Aman<sup>60</sup> declared:

“Democracy is more than a set of tools or a public apparatus to be manipulated by the elite. It is, in the last resort, embedded deeply in our culture and our legal system. To date our apparent lack of response is due to the fact that we have not fully grasped the profound way in which globalisation is embedded in our democratic institutions, now necessitating change and a reconceptualisation of our basic operating assumptions. Recognising how globalization has created a new public private sector, broadening the range of influential state, non-state and inter-state actors, positions us to reconceptualise administrative law as a resource for reform. Such a reconceptualisation is necessary if we are to retain the values on which democracy is based – transparency,

---

<sup>60</sup> Aman, above n 60, 180-181.

accountability, and a body politic of engaged and informed citizens. Globalization highlights the importance of such values, ever more strikingly, as fundamental to the ways in which we govern ourselves, every day, at the domestic level.”

There are several answers to the concern about the democratic deficit, as it impinges upon the kind of judicial deployment of the principles of international law in constitutional adjudication, for which I would argue:

1. It is important to stress once again that the judicial use of such material is not normative. No-one believes that the principles of international human rights law, unless incorporated into municipal law by a lawmaker acting within power, operate as binding rules. No-one suggests that they *bind* a judge to give effect to them, unless trumped by local constitutional or statutory law. The principles provide a context, a reminder of universal notions and a stimulus to the judge’s own thinking. That thinking remains always anchored in the task presented by municipal law. In turn, this is generally controlled by the text of a municipal law, whether found in a national or sub-national constitution, statute, subordinate law or decisional authority;
2. At this level of influence, it is not reasonable, nor is it logical, to demand a direct democratic component for such international law principles. In a world of nearly seven billion people, how would that be humanly possible, except by authority delegated to representatives of nation states, to agree on any principles or rules on international questions? To expect such rules to be internationally answerable, in some direct way, to the opinions of local communities, or even to national communities in a country of great population such as the United States, is to indulge in a romantic concept of democracy. The building of international law is essential for the extension to all human beings of the benefits of the rule of law. It is necessary for building effective support for universal human rights. In such matters, romance must give way to reality. The United States, as a major actor and potential beneficiary of the spread of international law, including the law of human rights, will in its own interests support this development locally and not seek to frustrate it by



unrealistic demands for direct accountability of international law to all citizens of the United States. If this were demanded by one nation, it would necessarily be required by all.

3. Used in the way propounded, international human rights law is simply part of the “dialogic process”<sup>61</sup>. As Justice Breyer pointed out in his public conversation with Justice Scalia: “It is common for an opinion to refer to material that ... has no ‘democratic provenance’. Blackstone has no democratic provenance. Law professors have no democratic provenance. Yet I read and refer to treatises and I read and refer to law review articles”. The principles of international human rights law are thus used in an analogous manner. They are deployed by independent members of the judicial branch whose justification in countries such as the United States and Australia need be no more than established constitutional principles governing judicial review and the necessity of creating and obeying an independent umpire with the power to decide contested constitutional questions; and
4. Within our own national politics, there remains a large element of fiction in the democrat component of law-making. To say this is not to decry the great benefits of living in a representative democracy. Both in Australia and in the United States we have witnessed the democratic principle at work in the recent electoral changes of the national government. Yet once one gets away from the activities of local government, the notion of popular participation in the content of law is at best theoretical and at worst romantic<sup>62</sup>. To conceive of national electors, visiting polling stations every two or three years, as actually approving every law and every provision in every law that is thereafter enacted in their name, is rather unpersuasive. Election campaigns in a modern democracy are typically concerned with bread and butter issues, if not with entertainment and personality. They are often controlled by huge donations of funds to political parties. Rarely do such electoral contests descend to the particularity of the rights of long-term refugees

---

<sup>61</sup> Koh, above n 47, *International Law as Part of Our Law* at 55.

<sup>62</sup> A.F. Mason, *Democracy and the Law: The State of the Australian Political System*, NSW LAW.SOC.J (Nov.2005), 68 at 69; M.D. Kirby, *Law Reform, Human Rights and Modern Governance: Australia’s Debt to Lord Scarman* (2006) 80 AUST.LJ 299 at 311-314.

or the entitlements to vote of short-term prisoners. For such decisions, the rulings of national courts are required.

To the extent that familiarity with relevant provisions of international law reminds judges of universal values, it helps them to discharge their municipal tasks more accurately and carefully. It reminds them that every land today, even one as great and powerful as the United States of America, is part of the world so that it should generally act as such.

### **RELEARNING THE REALISM OF ROSCOE POUND**

In navigating the present times, the United States of America and Australia, as mature democracies with independent judges and lawyers, must play leading parts in bringing international law and municipal law into greater harmony. This is a large challenge for judges in particular. However, I am confident that, though the judges do not personally feel the movement of the world, they know that it is moving. They sense its forward direction. They will not attempt to deceive themselves and others into believing that it is motionless and unaffected by the globalisation that is everywhere about us. And with globalisation comes an appreciation of the obligation of being part of common humanity and of protecting its universal values, including through the exposition of national laws and the operation of municipal judicial institutions.

Such was the vigor of the question of Judge Sotomayor that some of her answers might have appeared to accept that, as a judge, she would be obliged to *apply* and not to *develop* the law; that she would not use international law or the law of other nations in interpreting the United States Constitution; and that her experience in life as a Latina and otherwise would be immaterial to her responses to the judicial function. Such answers, whilst much desired by the political branches in the Executive and Congress, do not necessarily tell the whole story. The role of a judge, especially an appellate judge, and particularly a judge of a final national court, is inescapably creative. Increasingly today, it involves knowledge of what is happening in other like jurisdictions. Without

exception, all of us are affected by our life experiences in perceiving problems and in understanding the demands of justice in the particular case. This is what Dean Roscoe Pound, born in Lincoln in 1888 and Dean of this Law School from 1910-1916, taught a hundred years ago. It remains true today. We need to learn and re-learn the realities that Roscoe Pound taught us. And lawyers need to share these realities candidly with the communities that they serve.

\*\*\*\*\*