

LEADING, NOT FOLLOWING

The Renewal of Australian Middle Power Diplomacy

**An address to
The Sydney Institute**

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My argument to you tonight is that over the last decade, Australia has increasingly become a follower rather than a leader in international affairs.

I will argue that Australia under the Howard Government, in a significant departure from its predecessor, has progressively abandoned the practice of creative middle power diplomacy.

I will also argue that this approach has not maximised Australia's foreign and trade policy interests and the time has come for Australia to confidently to redefine a new Australian middle power diplomacy for the 21st century.

And I will argue all three propositions in an approach entirely consistent with Australia's obligations under the US alliance.

The Three Pillars

The Australian Labor Party's policy approach to Australia's place in the region and the world is anchored in the three pillars of Labor foreign policy - anchored in turn in the ALP National Platform. These are:

- Our alliance with the United States;
- Our membership of the United Nations; and
- Our policy of comprehensive engagement with Asia.

Labor is proud of its role in the formation of the US alliance when Curtin looked to America in 1941.

Every successive Labor government and opposition since Curtin has reaffirmed our commitment to that alliance.

It is anchored in our view that in the post-war history of the world, America has been an overwhelming force for good.

It is also anchored in our view that the US strategic presence in East Asia and the West Pacific in the post-1975 period has created the necessary strategic stability to underpin the economic (and in part political) transformation of East Asia.

Labor also believes that Australia's defence and intelligence needs are greatly enhanced as a result of our security and intelligence treaties with the United States. In this context, it is sometimes forgotten that Australia's accession to the UKUSA Agreement that underpins our access to the US global intelligence network occurred under the Chifley Labor Government well prior to the signing of the ANZUS Treaty under Menzies in 1951.

However for the Australian Labor Party, our alliance with the United States does not automatically mandate our compliance with every element of US foreign policy. This marks a fundamental difference between ourselves and the conservatives. We disagreed with Washington over Vietnam. We disagreed with Washington over the second Iraq war (having been the first ally militarily to support the US during the first Iraq war) and we disagree with Washington's posture on a range of other matters from global climate change to Guantanamo Bay. We also believe that such differences can be managed within the fabric of a robust alliance relationship.

The second pillar of Labor's foreign policy is our membership of the United Nations.

Labor under Foreign Minister Evatt played a significant, middle power role at the San Francisco Conference in 1945 in carving out a place for middle and small powers in the drafting of the UN Charter and the emerging architecture of the United Nations Organisation.

Evatt's logic remains valid 60 years later for middle powers like Australia: that is, we have a fundamental national interest at stake in an international rules-based order that protects smaller states from more powerful states.

A rules-based order also enables smaller states to negotiate the international security, political and economic systems with a degree of predictability – free from the rolling threat of territorial invasion that regularly challenged the international order in the 1920s and 1930s.

For these reasons, Labor both in government and in opposition, has maintained a deep commitment to Australian multilateral diplomacy – both as a mechanism through which we can make a contribution to improve the international order, and at the same time using the multilateral rules-based system to leverage our position in pursuit of our national interests.

While the conservatives under Menzies and Fraser never exhibited the same level of enthusiasm for Australian multilateralism as we saw under Chifley and Whitlam, it is fair to say this gap has widened greatly between Labor and the Liberals over the past 20 years.

The third pillar of Labor foreign policy is our approach to comprehensive engagement with Asia. This began with Chifley's and Evatt's support for the Indonesian independence movement in the 1940s, in defiance of the Dutch and to the dismay of most of the Great Powers at the time.

This tradition of engagement continued under Whitlam with the diplomatic recognition of China in 1972 (Labor's electoral loss in 1949 having prevented Australia from arriving at the same rational conclusion two decades earlier).

If there has been a core conceptual difference between Labor and the Liberals over the last half century on Australia's engagement with Asia it has been this: Labor has sought to secure Australia's future *in* Asia, while the Liberals until most recently have sought to secure Australia's future by defending it *from* Asia.

The depth of these differences of approach to Asian regional engagement continued right through until November last year when Mr Howard finally yielded to Labor's historical critique of Howard's opposition to Asian engagement. Following much public prompting from Labor, Mr Howard finally agreed to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN which was a precondition for participation in the inaugural East Asian Summit.

This was the Prime Minister who when Leader of the Opposition campaigned on the need to reduce Asian immigration to Australia. How things have changed. Nonetheless we should always be cautious about this Prime Minister's capacity to flick the switch to Hansonism if and when domestic political circumstances so dictate.

In summary, however, on the question of Australia's long-term engagement with the region, let the history books record that Mr Howard has finally conceded the core argument to Labor.

These then are the three fundamental pillars of Labor foreign policy – and it is within this conceptual architecture that I argue the time has come for Australia to resuscitate its tradition of middle power diplomacy which we have so effectively deployed in the past.

Opportunities Seized, Opportunities Squandered

Last week at the Australian Institute of International Affairs in Canberra, I reflected on whether governments, in particular long-term governments, effectively use the political mandate they are given by the Australian people to advance the long-term interests of the nation. Or whether governments, even long-term governments, simply become trapped in the day to day politics of “issue management” with the overriding objective being the maintenance of incumbency rather than a program of long-term national reform. Let me restate what I had to say last week in Canberra.

The purpose of government is not simply to be in government.

The purpose of government is to provide leadership in the long-term national interest.

Government provides opportunities which may be seized – or opportunities which may be squandered.

The Hawke and Keating Governments seized the opportunities that they were presented with to lay the foundations for Australia's long-term economic prosperity. They did this through:

- floating the currency;
- deregulating interest rates;
- finance sector reform;
- dismantling the tariff wall;
- the negotiation and implementation of national competition policy;
- the far-reaching array of micro-economic reforms brought about through the new federalism; and
- a revolution in national savings policy through the introduction of universal superannuation.

These were big policy decisions. Each involved political pain. Each produced long-term policy gain for the nation.

And they were driven by a long-term strategic commitment to enhance Australia's long-term international economic competitiveness by enhancing productivity growth.

One of the many core lies told by the Howard Government is that it is somehow responsible for Australia's prolonged period of economic prosperity. Both the Prime Minister and the Treasurer have laboured for ten long years to try and build the myth that this was all somehow their doing. It was not.

Every mainstream economic commentator in this country acknowledges that without the fundamental economic reforms of the Hawke and Keating Governments, the Australian economy would never have turned around.

The only significant action by the Howard Government to promote economic growth was its decision not to reverse the hard economic decisions taken by Labor.

The Howard Government has sought to portray the decisions that it had taken as enhancing economic growth. However, this is little more than political window-dressing.

The introduction of the GST was marketed as a necessary underpinning for long-term economic growth. In fact, there was no economic modelling of any consequence to substantiate this proposition. The introduction of the GST simply masked a tax grab by the Commonwealth.

The introduction of the new laws governing Australian workplaces has been marketed as a necessary long-term economic reform to enhance productivity. Once again, this is designed to mask the Government's real agenda, which is a political agenda, namely to crush the trade union movement because of the movement's close relationship with the Australian Labor Party.

When it comes to critical, productivity-enhancing policies in skills formation and infrastructure development, the Howard Government has been missing from the field. The recent publication of the OECD report on the Government's declining public investment in skills formation is a clear-cut indictment of failed performance. Hence declining productivity growth. Hence the re-emergence of inflationary pressures. Hence the concerns of the Reserve Bank.

On the economy, the last decade has been a decade of opportunities squandered rather than a decade of opportunities seized. The result is that Australia's economic growth is starting to slow.

There can be no starker contrast between two philosophies of government: opportunities seized by the Hawke and Keating Governments to fundamentally reform the economy; in contrast to opportunities squandered by the Howard Government to sustain this reformist tradition. Instead of productivity-enhancing reform, we are served up politically self-serving ideology.

The same can also be said of foreign policy. The period of the Hawke and Keating Governments was a period of foreign policy dynamism for Australia. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The Chemical Weapons Convention. The Cambodian Peace Settlement. The establishment of APEC. The establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum – the only pan regional forum on security policy matters to this day. All the product of effective, high-level Australian middle power diplomacy.

By contrast, the foreign policy legacy of the Howard Government has been reactive: following the United States into Iraq; following the United States in their refusal to ratify the Kyoto Convention on global climate change; failing to anticipate security policy challenges emerging with the rise of Jemaah Islamiah in South East Asia; the refusal to take the lead on the Solomon Islands until the Government's hand was finally forced; the failure to effectively respond to the emerging law and order challenges of Papua New Guinea; and a failure to anticipate East Timor's long-term security needs.

If there is one common denominator in this long list of policy failures, it has been a Government responding to events rather than anticipating events. A passive rather than an active strategy for government.

This is the exact reverse of Labor's foreign policy tradition which has always sought to be ahead of the curve, rather than behind it. Anticipating, not just responding to events. And, most critically, deploying Australia's formidable diplomatic capital through the creative foreign policy innovation of a respected middle power.

Once again, opportunities seized. Not opportunities squandered.

The same is also evident if we contrast Australia's trade policy achievements over the course of the Hawke, Keating and Howard Governments as well.

Australia under Labor Trade Ministers, Dawkins, Duffy, Evans, McMullan and Cook championed the cause of multilateral trade liberalisation – and agricultural free trade in particular.

Let's be absolutely clear about this: the Australian Labor Government under Minister Dawkins put agricultural trade liberalisation on the GATT/WTO formal agenda for the first time. There had been nine previous failed attempts to do so going back to the time when the GATT was first established in 1947. Australia succeeded at Punta de Este in 1986 because Australia established a new negotiating Group in the Uruguay Round (the Cairns Group), took over the Chairmanship of this group, and then leveraged the US and the Europeans to include agriculture for the first time. As a commentary in the *US Journal of Commerce* noted at the time:

“The Mighty Cairns...[has] succeeded in embarrassing both the European Community and the United States into serious negotiations on farm talks.”

Fifteen years later, an OECD paper reached a similar conclusion:

“The Uruguay Agreement on Agriculture [URAA] was a watershed, in that agriculture was finally subjected to multilateral rules and disciplines. Specific reform requirements were mandated in three areas: market access, export subsidies and domestic support...The disciplines on export subsidies were the most effective part of the URAA, with countries less able to resort to export subsidies when world markets weakened”.

In summary, the establishment of the Cairns Group and the critical role that it played during the conclusion of the Uruguay Round provided a further demonstration of Australian middle power diplomacy at its best.

The Hawke Labor Government through John Dawkins succeeded in initiating the formation of a 'third force' of trade liberalising agricultural exporters capable of generating a new dynamic in the global trade negotiations process.

In addition, the Hawke Labor Government revamped the Trade Department and appointed Australia's first Ambassador to the GATT.

And Labor Trade Minister Michael Duffy, who succeeded Dawkins, for the first time in the history of the GATT proceeded to prepare a comprehensive plan to reform world trade in agriculture.

It was this plan that shaped the agreement to reform world trade in agriculture that was finally adopted as one of the historic outcomes of the Uruguay Round.

When the Coalition Government was elected in 1996, it inherited the rich political and diplomatic capital that had accrued in Australia's good name as a result of the central role

that previous Labor Governments had played in bringing the Uruguay Round to a successful conclusion.

Ten years later this inheritance has been largely squandered. Australia did not play a leadership role in the resolution of the protracted debate of the Director-Generalship of the WTO between New Zealand and Thailand - both members of the Cairns Group that Australia had created.

Australia also failed to play a leadership role at the Seattle Ministerial Conference in 1999 which simply imploded.

And once the Doha Round got going, Trade Minister Vaile saw the Cairns Group which he chaired effectively dismembered as 12 of its 18 member states defected to a new group (the G20) chaired by Brazil. If ever you wanted to see a single event which brought about the collapse of Australian middle power trade diplomacy, this was it.

Furthermore, Australia under Mr Vaile's chairmanship of the Cairns Group, has not produced during the Doha Round so far a formal policy position of its own in order to break the impasse between the EU, the US and the G20.

Neither the Prime Minister nor the Trade Minister have advanced anything resembling a coordinated political diplomatic strategy in the capitals of North America, Western Europe, China and India in order to bring this Round to a successful conclusion. The Doha Round has suffered from the lack of a committed global product champion. This provided a country like Australia copious fertile ground in which to deploy Australian middle power diplomacy. Instead the government has run a thousand miles away, refusing to risk any of its political capital on an enterprise as risky as this.

Despite all this, let's hope that Mr Vaile in Cairns this week, at this 20th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Cairns Group by Labor, manages to secure an agreement from the other participants on a fixed date, venue and agenda for a further meeting of the principals immediately following the US mid-term elections.

The over-riding point I am seeking to make across the economic policy, foreign policy and trade policy spectrum is that the dominant political model adopted during this decade of John Howard's incumbency has primarily been one of 'being there'. Politics for politics sake. Government for government's sake alone.

As opposed to taking political risks in order to bring about policy dividends in the long-term national interest.

The truth is, in policy terms the Howard Government is one of the laziest governments in Australia's post-war history. It is first and foremost a government of political management. And like a rich child of the second generation, it has squandered the policy inheritance it received from Labor.

The collapse of Australian middle power diplomacy of the last decade has not just been shaped by a Prime Minister and Ministers unprepared to step outside their comfort zone.

It has also been reinforced by an overwhelming predisposition on the part of the Howard Government to rely on bilateralism rather than creative multilateralism to advance Australia's national interests.

We see this in security policy where the Government stands idly by while the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty disintegrates before our very eyes in the absence of any effective multilateral initiative from Australia and while the Government contemplates the possibility of a bilateral uranium supply agreement with India outside the framework of the NPT.

We see the same on trade policy where the Government has dedicated the bulk of its political and diplomatic capital to the negotiation of bilateral free trade agreements while refusing to dedicate parallel resources to the successful conclusion of the Doha multilateral round.

We also see the same on global climate change where the Government actively seeks to sabotage the Kyoto Protocol that it signed back in 1997, and remains with the United States the only two developed countries in the world to remain outside this multilateral framework.

A combination of political timidity, a bureaucracy which has been taught that creative policy innovation is not that which this Government primarily rewards, combined with an overarching preference for a bilateral deal over a multilateral initiative means that Australia's long-established tradition of creative and effective middle power diplomacy has withered on the vine.

The Characteristics of Middle Power Diplomacy

The concept of middle powers in the international system and the strategic behaviour that they exhibit has been the subject of long debate.

The concept dates back to the origins of the European state system. In the 15th Century, the Mayor of Milan, Giovanni Botero, divided the world into three types of states – *grandissime* (empires), *mezano* (middle powers) and *piccioli* (small powers).

According to Botero, a *mezano* or middle power 'has sufficient strength and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others'.

Today, we would call this defence self-reliance.

In studying the gradation of powers in the international system, writers like Martin Wight, Carsten Holbraad and Hedley Bull have focused on military capability and economic development as the two broad criteria for measuring power in the international system. Middle powers were clearly larger and more able to project force than the small states, but lacked the global reach of the great powers.

More recently, the concept of middle power diplomacy has also been broadened to include moral leadership within the international system: the former being about the potential exercise of hard power, and the latter, the exercise of so-called soft power.

The central characteristic of Australian middle power diplomacy has been coalition building with like-minded states in order to create the political momentum necessary to bring about multilateral diplomatic outcomes. This is because while Australia is not a super power, it is nonetheless a significant power, with a keen interest in shaping the strategic order.

As former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has described it:

“Australia is a middle power. We are manifestly not a great or even major power; nor, however, are we small or insignificant. The characteristic method of middle power diplomacy is coalition-building with like-minded countries.”

Five broad characteristics can be observed to describe an effective Australian middle power strategy over time.

- First, Australia has generally sought to maintain an independence of diplomatic action within an alliance framework. The US alliance of itself provides Australia with a certain diplomatic leverage in dealing with other states. But it also provides a flexibility and freedom of diplomatic operation in areas beyond the formal constraints of alliance obligations.
- Second, Australia’s middle power diplomacy has historically demonstrated a strong commitment to the collective security principles embodied in the United Nations Charter. Collective security generally suits middle powers like Australia who have a limited range of force projection capability. As it occurs within the framework of the UN multilateral system, it provides us platform for what Professor J.D.B. Miller has described as Australia’s ‘dogged low gear idealism’.
- Third, Australian middle power diplomacy has had a strong, but no means exclusive, regional focus.
- Fourth, Australia’s middle power tradition requires a high degree of defence self-reliance. In order to play a credible role in regional security dynamics, middle powers like Australia need to sustain sufficient strategic weight in order to influence security outcomes. In other words, it is the objective calculus of Australia’s strategic weight which in part shapes the strategic choices of others.
- Fifth, an effective middle power diplomacy for Australia requires an extensive diplomatic network; well-maintained diplomatic relationships across a broad geographical spectrum (particularly if rapid diplomatic coalition building is to be possible); and a creative, innovative policy planning capability within the Foreign Ministry if “outside the square” diplomatic solutions are to be properly developed and implemented.

For Australia, despite a decade of neglect, most of the national software and hardware underpinning an effective middle power diplomatic strategy remains intact.

However, the current Government has demonstrated repeatedly a lack of political will to deploy our diplomatic assets in pursuit of important regional and global objectives.

Furthermore, within our immediate region, specifically the Solomon Islands and East Timor, Australia has not been deploying that which could be credibly described as middle power diplomacy. We have by definition been acting as the great power within the region where military deployments have rapidly taken the place of concentrated diplomatic engagement.

Australia's military engagement in these small states of our immediate neighbourhood do not therefore provide illustrations of the type of middle power diplomatic activism on the wider regional and global stage that have been the principal focus of my remarks tonight.

Australian Middle Power Diplomacy for the Future

The truth is, at some stage during the last decade, Australia's long-standing tradition of innovative, independent diplomacy appears to have been snap-frozen.

In the post-September 11 period, it is rare indeed to find the Australian Government looking outside the alliance framework – even when there has been no alliance impediment for doing so. It seems that on most matters of foreign policy (be they bilateral, regional or multilateral), Canberra's default position has been increasingly to take Washington's lead. The problem with this approach is that the interests of Canberra and Washington do not always align; sometimes Washington is not as fully engaged with a particular foreign or trade policy matter in our region that Canberra needs to be; and occasionally Washington just gets it wrong.

Ask yourself this simple question: identify now which major global or regional diplomatic initiative the Howard Government is currently championing in its own right? It is hard to answer this question. I follow these debates closely and I could not do so. Certainly none come to mind at the multilateral level. And beyond the Solomon Islands and East Timor, none come to mind at the regional level either. And all this at a time when the global and regional challenges facing our country are of an unprecedented complexity.

Tonight I would like to identify five specific areas where Australia should now take the lead in developing an independent diplomatic initiative – in part because currently there is a vacuum; in part because the areas I propose to nominate are of great material relevance to Australia's national interest; and in part because Australia in each of these areas has long-standing *bona fides*.

First, Australia should establish a national diplomatic initiative aimed at restoring the integrity of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Following recent developments involving North Korea, Iran, the sale of Pakistan's nuclear secrets by AQ Khan and the decision by

the United States to engage in nuclear cooperation with India outside the framework of the NPT, the current non-proliferation regime is fundamentally fracturing.

The consequences of the collapse of this regime for Australia are acute, including the outbreak of regional nuclear arms races in South Asia, North East Asia and even possibly South East Asia. The impact on Australia's long-term national security interests is immense. Australia, as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, has a responsibility to promote the NPT.

However, in the past 12 months Australia chaired unsuccessfully both the G10 at the NPT Review Conference in May and the high level negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation at the last UN General Assembly in September which failed to get a single reference to non-proliferation into the outcomes document of the Millennium Review Summit. This is an indictment in itself of Australia's failing middle power diplomacy at work.

Following these comprehensive NPT failures, Mr Howard must as a matter of urgency launch an Australia Initiative by convening an international conference of like-minded states in Canberra.

This would work in conjunction with Labor's proposal to establish a diplomatic caucus of like-minded countries to promote the NPT. The fact is through the range of arms control and disarmament initiatives launched during Gareth Evans' Foreign Ministership, Australia has retained technical and diplomatic credibility within the field. That's why Australia should lead an initiative to explore options for reinvigorating and strengthening the NPT at this critical time. And that's why Labor will be debating the future of the NPT at its National Conference next April.

Second, Australia over the next three months must launch its own national Doha Initiative in order to achieve a breakthrough in the Round. The US fast track authority expires in July 2007. There is a narrow window of opportunity during a three month period between December 2006 and March 2007 when agreement could still be reached. The negotiating gap between the three groups on market access, export subsidies and domestic support is bridgeable. But once again this requires creative diplomacy and a Prime Minister engaging in an intensive global and regional political offensive to create the political momentum necessary to bring Doha to a successful conclusion. Australia launched a similar national initiative during a critical stage in the Uruguay Round. The time has come to do so again.

Third, China looms as a key to any effective global response to the challenge of global climate change. China (unlike Australia) has signed and ratified Kyoto. What is up for debate are the specific obligations that should accrue to China after 2012. Australia should initiate a Government-to-Government level Australia-China Commission on Global Climate Change. Australia has a good diplomatic relationship with Beijing. Australia is also a major energy supplier to China. Australia therefore has a direct environmental and economic interest at stake in helping shape China's response to global climate change.

Fourth, Australia as the chair of APEC in 2007 should develop an APEC Reform Initiative. The truth is APEC since the Kuala Lumpur meeting in 1998 has been steadily losing its political and economic policy momentum. Given that the establishment of APEC was the result of a Labor Government initiative in late 1994, Mr Howard must now develop a

comprehensive proposal to re-establish APEC as the principal deliberative forum of the region. APEC possesses the potential to reduce over time some of the bilateral brittleness in the relationships between China, Japan and the United States. APEC also has the potential to be deployed to politically re-energise the Doha Round as it did in relation to the Uruguay Round in the early 1990s. One practical measure the Prime Minister should champion at the Sydney Summit (and in the 12 months leading up to it) is a truly integrated strategy for responding to regional pandemics, including Avian Influenza. In addition to this, Labor will be advancing further policy initiatives in the 12 months ahead.

Fifth, Australia should launch a high level initiative to accelerate the establishment of an integrated Regional Disaster Coordination Authority for the region. Earthquakes, Tsunamis and volcanic activity across South East Asia and the West Pacific remain of acute concern to all regional states. ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (itself part of an Australian diplomatic initiative) have begun some tentative work in this area. Australia should take the lead in driving this process forward both diplomatically and operationally. Australia should consider offering either Darwin or Townsville as an integrated regional headquarters for the coordination of national defence and emergency services contributions to a given regional natural disaster event. Apart from the positive contribution this could make in response to future disasters (where emergency response times have generally been slow), using the ARF for this purpose could construct over time a useful confidence and security building measure (CSBM) in a region which at present has few such measures.

If Australia in the future is to re-enter the field as a practitioner of effective middle power diplomacy, we need to recreate within its Foreign Ministry the policy horsepower to develop, finetune and implement initiatives of the type I have just referred to.

This has not been possible over the last decade when Foreign Minister Downer has presided over the de-skilling of the Department, the denuding of DFAT's policy staff and the abolition of DFAT's policy planning function. DFAT in 2006 has less policy staff than it had in 1996: despite Bali and despite the regional campaign against terrorism and despite the proliferation of other security and trade policy challenges confronting Australia over that period.

DFAT needs to be injected with policy resources to do the job it once did.

For this reason, a Labor Government will establish an Office of Strategic Policy within the Department (with costs to be absorbed from Departmental resources) as a high-level policy planning capability for the Minister and the Government. Rather than simply responding to international events as they unfold, Labor will establish a long-term policy and strategic planning capability with a view to shaping events and positioning Australia for the environment it will confront in 10, 20 and 50 years time. All substantive Foreign Ministries around the world have such a capability. It is remarkable that Australia does not. Particularly in a period when our defence and intelligence agencies have had their resources augmented so significantly in the five years since September 11.

It is time to restore the balance when it comes to Australian foreign and trade policy.

Renewing Australia's middle power diplomacy will be a priority of the next Labor Government.

Because the act of diplomacy is not to fight wars, it is to prevent wars.

That is why Australia's diplomatic, security and intelligence efforts must be prosecuted in tandem if we are to maximise our national security and other interests in the decade ahead.

Creative middle power diplomacy must represent a core part of Australia's national capabilities as we face the range of regional and global challenges of the decade ahead.

Australia can either wait for events to unfold or Australia can be on the front foot and where possible be part of the solution.

The Australian character is not to stand idly by. Rather, it is to act.

To lead. Not just to follow.