

Good International Citizenship: The Case for Decency
Gareth Evans (Monash University Publishing, 2022)

Review by Mercedes Page, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Issue 15, July 2022

In *Good International Citizenship: The Case for Decency* – an extended essay for Monash University Press’s “In the National Interest” series – Gareth Evans puts forward a framework for dealing with the complexities and transnational challenges of the twenty-first century.

At the heart of this framework is Evans’s concept of a good international citizen, a title he assigns to states that care about preventing and alleviating suffering around the world even when there’s no direct impact on their security or prosperity. This concept guided Evans as Australian foreign minister between 1988 and 1996 under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. In the decades since, Evans concedes, Australia’s record as an international citizen has been patchy at best and is currently “embarrassingly poor”.

For Evans, “It is time to take stock of why it matters to be, and to be seen to be, a good international citizen; how and why we have been backsliding; and what we can do as a nation to restore our credentials.”

He opens by asking why Australia (or any other country) should care about poverty, atrocities, catastrophes and suffering in faraway countries. Evans argues that this is both a moral imperative and in the national interest.

After a short journey through his philosophical and ethical reasoning, Evans argues that we share a common humanity that obliges states to do the least harm and the most good they can. He acknowledges that the primary appeal of being a good international citizen will be to idealists. Yet for the “hard-headed realists” who want more than a “warm inner glow”, Evans argues that there are three ways it is also in a state’s national interest.

First, being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen enables progress on issues requiring collective action. This includes transnational and existential challenges: from pandemics to violent extremism and from ending extreme poverty to the collective action we desperately need on climate change. Second, if Australia assists another country, it will be more likely to help Australia. Third is the reputational benefit. How a country is seen by others determines how well it advances its interests. For a nation like Australia, which is not globally insignificant but not big enough to demand our interests be accommodated, soft power is particularly important. We depend upon our capacity to persuade.

Evans sets out four benchmarks for what makes a good international citizen: being a generous aid donor; advancing human rights; doing everything we can to prevent the horror of war and mass atrocities, and alleviating their consequences, including for refugees; and being an active participant in tackling large existential and transnational issues such as climate change, nuclear war and global health.

It’s not much of a spoiler to reveal that Australia’s record is patchy against these benchmarks. Yet Evans concludes it’s not too late for the nation to become a good international citizen again and sets out – sharply and succinctly – how leaders can gain support for a more expansive and idealistic foreign policy. He explains that harnessing the power of reason is particularly important for leaders appealing to cynical politicians, advisers and public

servants who are “rather immune to moral arguments”. He argues that being a good international citizen is as important as promoting economic and security interests.

It’s hard to see anything controversial in Evans’s essay. Indeed, as we grapple with the consequences of China’s increasing influence and security ties in the Pacific, few would deny the hard-headed national interest argument for greater Australian engagement in our region.

However, one wonders if it takes more to be a good international citizen in the twenty-first century. Evans’s thinking is naturally grounded in his experiences as foreign minister in the 1980s and ’90s, and his later role as CEO of the International Crisis Group, where he led the establishment of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect. He tends to deal with thematic issues in the international system but pays less attention to the sharpening geostrategic realities in a system characterised more by competition than cooperation. What does it take to be a better partner in this world?