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## America offers lessons about life in Australia

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The magnificent sugar maples of upstate New York, which grow up to 30 metres, are presently under a heavy bank of snow. In the past months they have moved through a seasonal cycle from green to gold to red to dead - in eerie parallel it feels with President Barack Obama's popularity ratings.

I followed both from my vantage point in Buffalo, a town poised on the edge of the Great Lakes where I was lecturing at the State University of New York last semester, an experience that made clear the very real differences in how Australians and Americans approach education and public life.

America during the fall (in both senses) was a strange place to be. Buffalo, once the third-richest city in the US, waxed fat on transshipment, steel and manufactures, is now the second poorest. Looking like its heart has been torn out of its body by giant, maleficent hands, its urban decay rivals New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Some people live in houses the size of golf courses. Others roam the streets, drugged, armed and looking for targets on which to project a despair so Miltonically deep it is a miracle the atmosphere isn't fugged with sulphur fumes. If you have ever wondered what the "post" in "post-industrial" stands for, visit Buffalo and wonder no longer.

America is a country with problems and may be, according to many Americans, a problem in itself. Yet it was refreshing to be in a milieu where this was admitted up front and the issue was what to do about it.

For the University of Buffalo, like other public universities around the country, the financial meltdown has not assumed a solidified form. Budgets are shrinking and class sizes growing. The latter-day horsemen of the Apocalypse stalk abroad: Downsizing, Restructuring, Revenue Raising and Official Reports. Still, the talk was always about ideas and money and never, as so often in Australia, about money alone.

The University of Buffalo has made a large number of junior faculty appointments in recent years and recognises the importance not only of holding on to these but of offering more.

Schools are conspicuously interdisciplinary and the atmosphere of intellectual inclusion is something of which the university is justifiably proud. While I was there, an astonishing array of scholars passed through - lawyers, anthropologists, scientists, historians, philosophers, artists - all speaking to, and with, each other.

As someone who moves awkwardly between the professional world, as a theatre director, and the academic one, as a cultural historian, I found the ease with which the boundary is traversed in the US impressive. Further, it seemed ideas themselves were treated as shared things and not as the private preserve of discursive and institutional domains.

Contrast this with the lacklustre state of Australia's university system and the moral torpor that is fast becoming the mark of our public life. I am lucky in my alma mater, La Trobe. But in the 17 years I have been postgraduate, lecturer and fellow at one place or another, I cannot recall one when major administrative reform was not on the agenda. "Why this perpetual restructure?" I once plaintively asked a professor. "When you've had the good years, you endure the bad," he answered. But what good years?

The reforms John Dawkins set going in the 1980s were either poorly thought through or poorly implemented. An army of sessional staff prop up a collapsing departmental framework and faculty are treated on a par with the moveable furniture.

Part of the difference is that, for better or worse, in the US system, academics still run it. But part lies in the

forthrightness of public life. Despite the proliferation of American flags on American porches, I was taken aback by how willing people were to engage in debate about what had gone wrong. In contrast to the glutinous self-congratulation Australia extends to itself for avoiding the worst of the global credit crunch, there was acknowledgement not only that something had happened but that something had been done.

Responsibility had to be avowed and remedial action taken. This was true in many areas: foreign policy, health care, constitutional reform. An active, forward-thinking approach was in the air, and it made me reflect on whether, in getting rid of John Howard, we had really got rid of his oleaginous double-thinking.

When students asked what Australia's main industry was, I took to answering honestly: making excuses.

For what is true of particular issues is true of the broader landscape. At the moment, all roads lead to climate change, a problem area requiring intellectual and moral directness if ever there was one. In one sense it is incredibly complicated; in another dead simple.

Do we tackle the health of our planet by doing today what we should shame to postpone until tomorrow? Or do we do what seems to come naturally now? Avoid, evade, plead insignificance, deploy mutually exclusive arguments, charm, smile, cross fingers, not look too deeply, hope for the best, pray for rain.

It wouldn't wash in the US for all its madness, poverty, intolerance and systemic ineptitude. There, if problems aren't solved, at least they're admitted to.

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*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/america-offers-lessons-about-life-in-australia-20100103-ln94.html>*