**On the cusp of greatness**

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**Have we become accustomed to thinking of political greatness as involving moments of symbolism rather than as involving reform achievements?**

MANY political leaders leave office with unfulfilled ambitions. Perhaps that is why so many busy themselves with grand projects in their retirement.

Such figures like to generate whirlwinds of activity. In vain, they try to relive the adrenalin of high office. Think of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair jetting across the world as global statesmen promoting the work of their eponymous non-government organisations. These days it seems no one can just slip into retirement with quiet dignity.

With all due respect to the likes of Clinton and Blair, you can't help feel this is motivated by a lingering sense they didn't quite achieve everything they wanted.

Whether it was that additional election victory, that piece of legislation they failed to pass, or that one mistake they wish they hadn't made, former political leaders will always have something gnawing away at their ego or conscience.

There is always something to make up for, always some history to rewrite. *Je ne regrette rien?* I suspect not.

Right now, US President Barack Obama can be excused for thinking that this isn't a fate he will have to confront when he departs the White House.

Earlier this week, the US House of Representatives passed a landmark healthcare bill, which extends health coverage to more than 30 million Americans currently uninsured. Obama has since signed the bill into law.

The legislation ranks among Lyndon Johnson's Civil Rights Act and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as one of the most significant social reforms introduced in the US.

Presidents for 100 years have tried to achieve universal health care for Americans. Whatever you may think of Obama or of his health reforms, he is all but guaranteed a place in the pantheon of US presidents.

Which brings us to the question of greatness. It is only natural for us to identify greatness with signal moments in history.

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in fact argued that "we think only in signs". He meant our social understanding is achieved through the interpretation of words, images, sounds, acts and objects.

For today's generation of children, it is likely that they will grow up regarding moments such as Obama's inauguration in 2009, or perhaps Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, as defining political moments.

But we should not confuse moments of historic import with greatness itself.

To say that greatness exists only as symbolic power would make no sense.

This is because greatness is a question of character.

In the first place, those political leaders who leave lasting legacies do so because, to paraphrase Machiavelli, they seek power to achieve glory. Power, for them, is a means to a larger end rather than an end in itself.

It is to be used to change society for the better, to make a difference. However, the ultimate test of greatness is to be able to show courage and strength in the face of adversity, to be able to show good judgment and to deliver meaningful and lasting change.

On these counts, after a rocky first year, Obama is well on his way to meeting the test.

Yet any greatness will be derived from neither his racial ancestry nor rhetorical virtuosity: it will come from the strength of his character and his reform achievements in office.

Australian politicians who like to cast their gaze towards the US for inspiration should take note.

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