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## How Tom Selleck Can Use John Gastil's New Book to Do the Sequel to "Running Mates"

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## **How Tom Selleck Can Use John Gastil's New Book to Do the Sequel to "Running Mates"**

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**John Gastil, *Political Communications and Deliberation*,  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008**

Book review by Richard C Stanton\*

A short time ago, while deliberating with myself how best to juggle a number of administrative tasks, a research proposal, and a book chapter deadline closing in fast (along with a review of this book on the docket as well), I decided to lunch in front of the television with John Gastil's latest book in my lap. I had a choice of watching (1) a National Press Club address (with an environmentalist speaker), (2) a tennis championship, or (3) a movie.

As a former journalist and Press Club member, I am always keen to watch the weekly address. The complicated juggling act, however, created a need for a bit of downtime, a diversionary tactic. I switched to the movie. And what a movie it was.

A mustache-less Tom Selleck played the role of an American Democratic Party presidential candidate struggling with morality. The movie, *Running Mates*, was about the need to present a winning candidate image and find funding for a successful campaign without compromising those policies nearest and dearest to the heart of Selleck's political character.

The denouement was a beauty. Selleck, as candidate Pryce (Pryce for President – nice ring) stood at the podium to accept the nomination, made a few rhetorical flourishes, then in straight-up Hollywood format, slammed the scripted speech shut. Instead, he began denouncing the evil within the party, about the corruption of the American political system, as well as in America generally – an evil that took democracy from the people and placed it in the hands of the corporates. Everyone cheered. Everyone roared and chanted 'America is not for sale, America is not for sale'. I sat with John Gastil's book glaring up at me, daring me to compare the synchronicity.

My son, a cynical law student (perhaps that's a tad redundant) who happened to be on holiday at the time, was right there watching and munching away with me. He commented that this narrative could in no way reflect reality (he meant Tom Selleck, not John Gastil).

He questioned why the television network had chosen to run the movie at that precise time, during the actual American presidential primaries. His comments were interesting. If the network had chosen to run the movie because it coincided with the presidential

primary in the US, it could do nothing more than provide an entertaining look at Hollywood's dramatization of political candidacy and political communication. It had no other relevance to an Australian audience. A few nights before this event, my son and his friends were sitting around watching television (this is where the Tom Selleck part seems relevant – Generation Y has found a new interest in the 1980s drama, *Magnum P. I.*) when a news item came on about the actual Democratic primaries and the victory of Barack Obama in Iowa. One of my son's friends, a woman, commented that she liked Hillary Clinton but thought a black president would be good too. Either a woman or a black, as long as it was not George Bush again. The point is that the U.S. Democratic primary had led the news bulletin in Sydney, Australia... and I'm watching a fictitious movie about it as well. Meanwhile, real news was being ignored: scores of people were being killed in Kenya. The thousands of deaths continuing in Sudan were no longer in the news cycle and (Australia's new Prime Minister) Kevin Rudd's promise that his cabinet and ministers would work through January seemed to have been buried among the bunting and hurrahs of November 2008 in America. But thanks to John Gastil, all this was hardly irrelevant fluff.

As I watched the plot of *Running Mates* unfold, I began marking passages in the book that were connected to this suddenly relevant American film. For example, Gastil: "*conversations and discussion are the most familiar forms of deliberation.*" Stanton looks up at television and sees Laura Linney and Terry Hatcher in a bathroom discussing who has slept with the proposed vice presidential running mate). Gastil: "*when people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view.*" Stanton looks at TV and sees Tom and Laura in a room full of people listening respectfully to a diverse range of opinions about who should be Tom's Vice President.

Now I should point out that there have been some very interesting film dramas over the years about the American national political contests, both Senatorial and presidential – witness Robert Redford in *The Candidate*, Alan Alda in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, and John Travolta in *Primary Colors*. But the problem for all the Hollywood- inspired dramatic versions is they are all the same. There is no difference of opinion on what is and is not a full spectrum democratic election and what is and what is not a genuine political candidate or a free marketplace of original ideas in a political communication campaign. The same can be said for a lot of material published under the cloak of scholarly work on political communication. Not so this book.

John Gastil, a professor of communications at the University of Washington, has taken an area of interest and pursued it with a vigour that is unusual in the genre (aside from an earlier work by Carson and Martin (1999) that provided a radical departure from the orthodox). McKie and Munshi (2008) have pointed out elsewhere that presenting an argument about a field of study that resides outside the orthodox and which is critical of a hegemonic position is a difficult task. Gastil has deliberated long and hard over the idea of deliberation. It is an exhaustive work. Where one might have expected the author to have stopped at certain gates, he has flattened them and run right on through. By way of example, where he has embraced the predictive areas of opinion, elections, government

and the media, he has cleverly interposed chapters on areas less frequently visited in political communication, i.e. the role of the judiciary, in particular the jury system; the role of the citizen at public meetings and forums; and my favorite, left 'til last, international deliberation.

A number of global organizations have seen fit in the past few years to attempt to act deliberatively. The World Trade Organization comes to mind with its amateurish invitation to world citizens to attend an open meeting on trade. But how far did they go to reach truly global deliberative democracy? This work could well present them with the 'thought tools' they need to get past their rhetorical goals and strive to reach a height much closer to the real thing.

John Gastil is no stranger to the concept of deliberative democracy. Indeed a quick glance within the pages of this journal will point up his expertise which includes co-editing the *Deliberative Democracy Handbook* with Peter Levine and authoring *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Democracy Through Deliberative Elections*, and *Democracy in Small Groups*.

But how widely is his work read and interpreted? And how far will it go towards becoming a model for reconfiguration? I suspect Gastil's ideas, perhaps in conjunction with his colleagues in this field, may have provided the underpinning for some of the campaigns run by candidates for the Australian federal election late last year. I say this because I observed closely the campaigns of a number of high profile candidates, as this election was about more than offering ordinary candidates wandering along traditional political pathways.

One candidate I have in mind is the former public broadcasting reporter, Maxine McKew, who ran against an incumbent, John Howard. Howard had represented the seat of Bennelong in Sydney's northwest for thirty three years, the last eleven of which he served as PM. Howard lost the seat to McKew by a slim margin with the assistance of a minor party, The Greens. In itself this is significant, as it was only the second time in Australian political history that a PM had been defeated in his own seat.

But more interestingly, the political campaign run by McKew played up some deliberative tactics, many of which could have been borrowed from Gastil and Levine's handbook, but also coincided with the more complex positions reflected in this, Gastil's new book. I wonder however, at the application of these tactics when the elected representative's intentions (conscious or unconscious) become less deliberative when in office. In this I suggest some candidates at the Australian federal election gave good performances acting as Gastil suggests in Chapters 2, 3 and, 4; using conversations and discussions, mediated deliberation (with the express consent of the orthodox media) and promising all types of electoral reform. All very well, except I suspect they may overlook Chapter 5: How Governments Deliberate, now that they are in office.

Some years ago, an interesting scholar, Hedley Bull, wrote an important book titled *The Anarchical Society*. Bull drew together the strands of an idea that I feel has some parallels

with Gastil's work. Bull and anarchy have been consigned, as we say, to history. The importance of Gastil's work and the implications for democracy are far too great to become a footnote to a reviewer in twenty five year's time.

The importance of the work lies in its writing and publication but equally in how it can act as the mover and shaper - and as Gastil says in the final chapter - to become the model for development, particularly in the USA, where the invention and support for reforms need to take place. Now to get Hollywood to *Running Mates II*.

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