



In this exclusive interview with *Brazil Talk*, Deputy Director at the Lowy Institute, Martine Letts, talks about her career highlights, the Institute's challenges and Australia's evolving engagement with Brazil.

As Deputy Director at the Lowy Institute, Martine Letts has much to say about international policy. But her background in Latin American affairs also gives her a particular perspective on the relationship between Australia and Brazil.

Letts served as Australian Ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay and was a member of the Executive Committee at the Council on Latin American Relations (COALAR). Prior to assuming her current position at Australia's leading think tank on international policy, she pursued a 17-year career with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, followed by four years as the CEO of Australian Red Cross.

How did you get involved in foreign affairs?

I started my professional life as a graduate trainee in foreign affairs. As my father was an Australian Trade Commissioner, I've always travelled around the world. Though I am Australian, I was born in Rome and lived most of my juvenile life in Germany, where I completed primary school. Therefore, international affairs have always caught my attention.

What has been the highlight of your career to date?

Much of my career has been focused on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation. In 1986, I was sent to Geneva as a member of the Australian delegation to the Conference on Disarmament and worked intensively on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) negotiations as well as nuclear non-proliferation. It was a very productive time in international disarmament and arms control and Australia played an influential role in the negotiation of the CWC as well as the conclusion of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The CWC, banning an entire class of weapons of mass destruction, was opened for signature in 1993 and the CTBT was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996.

I also worked on nuclear non-proliferation in Vienna for three years. Australia used its role as one of the world's principal suppliers of uranium as a platform for strong and effective non-proliferation diplomacy, even though the exports were quite controversial in Australia at the time. Having worked in this field for 10 of my 17 years in foreign affairs, this was definitely the highlight of my career.

Did you join the Lowy Institute straight after that?

No, I was offered a position at the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1997, but chose instead to accept the post of Australian Ambassador in Argentina in February 1998. The day I left for Buenos Aires I recall listening to the debate in the Australian parliament about whether Australia should become a republic. It was an exciting time in Australian politics and an exciting time for me professionally. I was also excited at the prospect of building on what was beginning to be a more important relationship between Australia and Latin America, still very much in its infancy.

Later in 1998, Qantas commenced operating one-stop flights to Buenos Aires via Auckland, which was an historic event. The strategy behind this decision was to open the gateway to the much larger potential market in Brazil. Unfortunately, it took many, many years before we could negotiate a bilateral airlines agreement with Brazil, but I am happy to say that this has finally been achieved. So some things change and some don't: Australia is not yet a republic!

How was your experience as Australian Ambassador to Argentina?

I think the Argentinians were shocked to receive someone relatively young and on their first ambassadorial posting as a head of mission. I also didn't speak Spanish, so I went to an intensive language course in the famous wine growing district of Mendoza, ensconced with a local family to learn Spanish. Being a youngish woman presented an initial advantage to get one's foot in the door with the Argentine authorities. But the culture was not quite accustomed to senior female diplomats, so we had to work extra hard to be invited back after the first encounter. I had eight great female ambassadorial colleagues and we had a highly effective team thing going with the New Zealand Ambassador in particular. It was a great time to be Australian Ambassador in Argentina as we were the 10th largest foreign investor at the time in fields as diverse as mining, insurance and agriculture.

How was it working with a Latin American government?

It was pretty chaotic because they did not have the sort of structure in government that I was accustomed to in Australia. The political situation was beginning to become quite unstable and the economy was showing signs of significant decline. My posting lasted for two-and-a-half years before I was called back to Australia for an assignment in Canberra. I had for some time wanted to try my hand at something outside Foreign Affairs and so applied to become Secretary-General (CEO) of the Australian Red Cross, which was advertised at that time. Much to my surprise I was successful, moving to Melbourne in January 2001 to take up the role.

Was it different from working with local government?

There was a lot less financial security, being a non-profit, non-government organisation. Even though it's one of the oldest non-profit organisations in Australia, it's always difficult to secure long-term, reliable financial support. But it was exciting to work in an organisation that delivered important humanitarian services at home and internationally based on enduring, global, internationally recognised humanitarian principles with a strong practical focus.

And, after that, you started at the Lowy Institute?

I started there in 2005, when I was appointed the Deputy Director. The Lowy Institute was established in 2003 to mark the 50th anniversary of Frank Lowy's arrival in Australia. In 2005, we moved to Sydney's CBD so we could be close to the internationally-focused business community. Since the official opening of our home at 31 Bligh Street in March 2005, we have become increasingly prominent in the Australian consciousness. The Lowy Institute was a new phenomenon in the Australian market and we are, to this date, Australia's only dedicated international policy institute.

Is the Lowy Institute self-funded?

Yes, it is independently funded. It has no particular political point of view. Scholars are individually responsible for what they publish. That said, it is pointless to conduct research on issues that interest our scholars only. We have to understand what interests the business community and conduct research in accordance with those broad interests without writing to a pre-determined outcome. The business community has a lot of ideas and expertise and makes a major contribution to our research and events. We would like to be able to engage even more with business in future.

Frank Lowy remains the Institute's major funder but we also have others. The Myer Foundation funds our Melanesia Program and we have a number of other foundation and corporate sponsors. To be an institute with a healthy future, we need to increase external ownership of our work. Without solid, diversified support, the longevity of the Institute will not be assured. That would be a shame as the Lowy Institute conducts work that is highly relevant to the national interest and to our future as a secure and prosperous nation. As I have no professional background in fundraising, this is a big challenge.

Is there more corporate interest now?

There is more corporate involvement but corporate interest is not all that high. When you ask our sponsoring companies, most will say, "Yes, we love the Institute but it's not our priority". I hope we can change this over time. And, the longer we are around and producing quality work, the more our message will be spread in the Australian consciousness. >

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Will be some Brazilian involvement as well?

Much to my excitement and relief, we now have some serious research planned on Brazil. We have two Brazilian authors who will be working with us because we want to reflect a Brazilian as well as an Australian perspective and appeal to a Brazilian audience as well.

And how do you plan to get the message across?

We'll have an official launch in Brazil and here at the Institute, post research conclusions on our blogs, work through the media and brief policymakers and business in Australia. It's an ongoing process of working your audience over quite a long period of time.

What is your knowledge about Brazil?

Joining COALAR helped me understand Brazil better. We should no longer treat Brazil simply as a country from Latin America because Brazil is soon going to be the fifth largest economy in the world. It has a huge territory and a huge population. Brazil carries more economic and strategic weight than other Latin American countries. That said, Brazil is a very important player in the South American continent and from a strategic point of view, we have to better appreciate the role Brazil plays in the Americas and in Latin America through Mercosul.

Were there any changes and improvements to COALAR while you were there?

There were a lot of changes in tourist and business links. For example, thanks to Lan Chile and Qantas, there were substantial increases in airline flights. Additionally, I really hope some more rational visa policies between both countries can be put in place to increase tourism and business links between Brazil and Australia. More Brazilians are coming to Australia for education and more Australians are heading to Brazil for a tourism experience. There are more people with money to travel and as everyone is slowly recovering from the GFC, this volume is set to increase even more.

How would you rank Australia's relationship with Brazil?

We can compare Australia's evolving relationship with Brazil to its relationship with India, which is cordial but not yet as engaged as it should be. Australia is not deeply engaged with Brazil at a strategic level. We need to work harder on this, as many other nations are doing so and we risk missing the boat. I hope the Lowy paper will make some recommendations in this respect.

Australia and Brazil have a lot in common, such as two women in power. Will this help?

It will help but I don't think it's the main thing. I think we have to develop some sort of bilateral dialogue, which is not only related to foreign policy, but also to security and

economic policy. We should institute a strategic dialogue similar to what we have with Britain, the US and others. We face many similar challenges to Brazil, starting with the way in which we balance our relationships with other global giants like China and the US.

Do you think this will happen?

I don't think anyone has ever proposed it publically. But I don't see why not and the Lowy Institute is trying to promote a more engaged, strategic relationship between Australia and Brazil. I really hope that by hosting the World Cup, Brazil will consolidate Australia's enthusiasm for soccer. Our chairman Frank Lowy helped Australia become a member of the Asian Football League. We ran a seminar on soccer diplomacy where, for the first time, important figures such as Craig Foster, Frank Lowy, Tim Harcourt and other senior representatives of the Australian business and sporting community got together to talk about sports and their impact on Australia's business and international interests. We are still seen as 'the rugby country' and we have to broaden our interest in soccer as well for its potential to bind nations like Australia and Brazil more closely together.

What is the Lowy Institute doing now?

We are pretty comfortable with the American alliance but will need to focus increasingly on our own region, which is becoming the centre of global growth and dynamism, but also more unstable as a result. We've been working a lot on the Indo-Pacific region, which is fundamental to Australia's future. We are also very excited as the editor of the *Financial Times* will be our Lowy lecturer this year. He will bring an important global financial media perspective to an Australian audience. We are searching for more partners and contributors because we want Australia to keep playing a major role in the international economic and strategic domain, so vital to our future as a nation. z

“The common default remains an image in Australia of Brazil as a country of soccer and samba and of Australia in Brazil as the country of the outback and exotic animals. This perception is changing, and we want to make our contribution.”