Andrew Dodd reviews Bob Carr’s absorbing and occasionally disturbing account of eighteen months as foreign minister

Between bilaterals: Bob Carr settles in for a bite to eat at Steersons steakhouse in Sydney. Tamara Voninski/AFR

Diary of a Foreign Minister
By Bob Carr | NewSouth | $44.99

BOB CARR is touring St Petersburg on his last day as Australia’s foreign minister. There’s a six-hour time difference between Sydney and this part of Russia so he’s enjoying the sunshine while Labor is assessing the size of its loss on the night of the 2013 federal election. It’s the first national election he’s missed since 1963, but as prime minister Kevin Rudd’s delegate at the G20 meeting he finds himself outside the Lenin Museum receiving texts from parliamentary colleagues back home.

First there’s news that Labor’s Matt Thistlethwaite is holding Peter Garrett’s seat of Kingsford Smith. Carr enters the museum to hear that Michelle Rowland is winning in the seat of Greenway. He’s near the room where the Communist Party official Sergei Kirov was assassinated and learns that Jason Clare, Tony Burke and Chris Bowen have all been returned.

It’s a rich juxtaposition that draws on Carr’s love of Russian history and literature, as well as his own past as a self-described “anti-Leninist” in Labor’s NSW Right. He never guessed he’d be in Russia at this moment, but in another sense this is exactly how he expected his term as Australia’s foreign minister would end. Not even those momentarily euphoric polls after Rudd’s return to the prime ministership had deluded him that he would get more than eighteen months in the job he had coveted all his adult life. It’s a moment tinged with personal pathos, as he contemplates the life of ordinariness before him. No more tête-à-têtes with world leaders. No more of the beloved diplomatic dispatches full of international gossip to read and savour each day. No more soaring above the mundane.

But it’s a moment of vindication too. As news comes in from Sydney, Carr is reassured that the ugly ousting of Julia Gillard was worthwhile. By allowing the return of Kevin Rudd, the Labor Party has averted near-oblivion. It has left the party a base on which to rebuild.

Bob Carr’s Diary of a Foreign Minister is many things. It is more than a catalogue of complaints about business-class travel and bad food. It is more than the self-absorbed musings of a man obsessed with organic oats and his own obliques — although it doesn’t disappoint on these fronts. It is 477 pages long, so it’s more than a gripe about the Melbourne Israel lobby and its hold on the Labor Party’s Victorian Right — an analysis that might be right but simply isn’t proved. It is, in short, much more than the sum of the coverage from those sections of the Murdoch press that hounded Labor from office and can’t find a civil word to say about it.

The diary is a voyage through the whirl and plod of international relations. It circles the planet numerous times, taking us in and out of the loci of Australia’s national — and Carr’s personal — interests. One minute we’re at a conference in Jakarta, the next at a bilateral in Geneva, before a briefing in Abu Dhabi and a meeting in New
York. The pace is wearying, sustained by sleeping pills to combat jetlag. There are meetings of AUKMIN and AUSMIN and all the other acronyms that make up the architecture of international diplomacy. There are encounters in extraordinary places, with Prince Charles at Highgrove, where Camilla is seen briefly through the window, wearing galoshes; with Prince Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who has been foreign minister of Saudi Arabia for nearly forty years; and with the equally maniacal exercise fanatic, General David Petraeus, in the headquarters of the CIA in Langley, Virginia.

Carr’s diary is also an insider’s account of what it takes to secure a seat on the UN Security Council. This becomes a quest, a raison d’être, for his first year in office, but it’s a poor substitute for a substantial policy objective. Carr doesn’t stop to explain why Australia is so driven to secure the spot, particularly when he must know that he’ll be handing a magnificent prize to the Coalition when it takes over. But it’s the big idea of his predecessor, Kevin Rudd, so Carr’s task is to deploy the skills of a party numbers man to amass, and then to hang on to, the votes of UN ambassadors across the globe. At one point, he calls Aurelia Frick, the foreign minister of Liechtenstein, to congratulate her on the birth of her son. He makes small talk before asking for her country’s vote. It is as shameless as that. But she seems to climb on board regardless.

It is also an insight into the Foreign Minister’s Club, the collection of the world’s external affairs ministers who meet regularly in various forums and who become so well-known to each other that they can avert international catastrophes by picking up a phone for a quick chat. Carr quickly strikes up close friendships with his counterparts. For example, on several occasions he flies via Singapore so he and Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam can discuss regional issues over a curry. But it’s the “super-urbane” Marty Natalegawa of Indonesia who emerges as Carr’s favourite.

When Marty has a few spare hours in Sydney, Carr imperils his own concave abs by whisking him home to Maroubra to enjoy some cake. Carr had planted the seed that Indonesia needs to stop granting visas on arrival for the thousands of Iranians who fly into Indonesia and later board boats for Australia. Marty later tells Carr that Indonesia must not be seen to be responding to an Australian request. Over the course of Carr’s tenure the idea grows and finally becomes reality. Later, when Carr hears that Marty is concerned that Papuan activists have opened an office in London, he calls to assure him that if a similar office opened here it would not be endorsed — but nor could it be stopped — by the Australian government. This is how nations talk to each other. This is how diplomacy works.

It is also the jottings of a man seeking self-education, which Carr readily acknowledges is an aspect of the job he relishes. As he puts it, “life is a war against boredom.” He sucks up the cables produced each day by Australia’s far-flung posts in readiness for the relentless meetings. It’s gratifying that he cares enough to read deeply and beyond just what he has been served up by his department. But Carr’s fascination is so central to this tale that you can’t help wondering whether he believes the whole wide world has been made a puzzle primarily for his own intellectual pleasure.

It is also an attempt to explain the interplay of the competing interests of the United States and China, and a search for Australia’s proper place in this dynamic tension. What to make of the American pivot to Asia, the opening up of China, and John Kerry’s shifting focus to the Middle East and away from the Pacific? How does Australia balance a deployment of US marines in our north while courting the Chinese, particularly after Obama’s criticism of China, made while addressing the Australian parliament? Carr circles around these questions, canvassing and chronicling the views of countless informed commentators. He doesn’t solve them, of course. He proffers an idea on resource sharing in the East China Sea, a kind of Timor Gap solution to ease tensions. Nothing comes of it.

And yes, it is a personal diary. Sometimes it is a stream of consciousness in which Carr enters truly weird territory. The letter from the obsequious airline official placating Carr because there were no English sub-titles for Wagner’s opera Seigfried is just jaw-dropping. What is Carr thinking? And what is he doing publishing this self-incriminating letter? Then there’s the note to the English playwright Alan Bennett in which he praises his play An Englishman Abroad. He has seen it ten times on international flights and needs to tell Bennett that it’s the best entertainment he’s ever seen on a plane.
This is the diary of a person who is naturally curious and, despite his petty obsessions, does appreciate the privilege of his role. This book is about capturing the experience, and putting himself in the centre of it. But it is also about sharing it, something he does well. He tells a good story. He writes crisply. He uses short sentences. He loves colour. Sometimes it’s a diary of incredible candour — the type that makes you stop a few lines beyond what you’ve read to ask yourself, “Did he really say that?” For example, on Syria, did he really quote British foreign secretary William Hague saying “the only immediate hope may be a defection of Alawite generals and an assassination?” How will reporting that help Hague’s cause?

It’s just as well he doesn’t criticise Edward Snowden or WikiLeak because to do so would make him a hypocrite. Carr routinely reveals the asides and inner thoughts of the leaders he meets. Australia’s current foreign minister, Julie Bishop, is right to ask whether world leaders will be as open with Australian foreign ministers in the wake of this book. But for the reader, it’s revelatory and valuable. As is the sneak peek inside the cabinet of a disintegrating Australian government as it tinkers with superannuation and wages war on the Murdoch press on the eve of an election. This is Carr the journalism-trained observer at work, although you’ve got to wonder whether he’s breached the sacred reporters’ code and betrayed the odd off-the-record assurance along the way.

Carr’s diary is also the litany of a man obsessed with his diet. Carr turns his nose up at the plastic food of airlines — a sure sign in my view of someone who has lost all sense of perspective. For Christ’s sake, you’re 35,000 feet in the air; you’re safe and snug and warm; you’re travelling at 600 miles an hour and you’re whinging about the quality of the food! For eighteen long months, Carr yearns for home-cooked meals or grass-fed beef or steel-cut oats (whatever they are). It is also a glimpse into the life of a gym junkie, who judges others on their thinness, and hoists flat-stomached people like General Petraeus, Prince Charles and Michael Bloomberg on to an elite pedestal, way above the rest of us with our convex abdomens and deep-fried obliques. Yes, he’s not always serious and yes, there’s truth behind the whinge. Obesity really is rife. But Carr is just too self-absorbed, too self-righteous.

So, too, Carr lauds deep-voiced people such as the “white haired foreign minister of Jamaica” with his “rolling basso profondo” operatic voice. This is pure projection, reflecting how Carr sees himself: the sonorous modulator, the best performer, the most animated orator, the best chairman of meetings that he knows. But the guy is also likeable. He has a Keatingesque allure. He paints word pictures so you see a vision of how things could be. He has so much self-belief you end up sharing some of it. His observations are generally sharp. On the logic of a two-state solution for Israel he is convincing. His realpolitik, perhaps inspired by a rather alarming personal relationship with Henry Kissinger, makes him pragmatic and strategic about the tussle of global tensions and competing interests. He is ambivalent about America. He has a voice in one ear warning him of its numerous failings at war and a voice in the other reminding him of its erudition and liberal values. He is hardline on asylum seekers. He declares that if he’d been prime minister the problem would have been fixed years ago. When he meets Abbott on the hustings he offers his support for a referendum to curb judicial power so the government can regain control of the borders. It’s another “Did he really say that?” moment.

Yet Carr is also idealistic. He openly elevates issues once considered flaky — such as the protection of the oceans and threatened species — to their rightful place in global discourse. He is a politician who has learnt from his own mistakes. He loves the craft. He’s up for a fight. He had a plan to combat the virulent Murdoch press that, if adopted, could have dented some of its fury. He’s a media tart but he can cut through. He embodies much of what was lacking in Labor’s leadership over the past seven years.

The diary is also an insider’s-from-the-outside look at the despair of federal politics. Consider that this is a man recruited by Gillard to be foreign minister but who quickly tires of her leadership. Carr concludes she lacks authority and that the public will never like her. Her voice is all wrong for a start. He notes that her advisers should take her off to voice training. He charts the slow process of her power ebbing away. For the sake of the party, he becomes a Rudd recruit but this doesn’t stop him lacing the book with examples of Rudd’s excesses as foreign minister. When a world leader shares an anecdote about an aggressive Rudd moment or a crazy Rudd idea, Carr duly notes it. But this isn’t simply duplicity; Carr is right in this analysis. Rudd’s behaviour might have made him enemies but he did have to be brought back. The public had turned on Gillard and she did have to go.
Faced with this reality, Carr writes, Gillard was selfish to stay; if she had volunteered to forego just ninety days as PM, as opposed to being forced out of office, her exit would have been more honourable. He reveals that he suggested this on the morning she was deposed. She wasn’t interested.

*Diary of a Foreign Minister* doesn’t reveal a Carr foreign affairs doctrine. But themes do emerge to demonstrate the kind of policy he prefers. He’s not interested in developing new formations for dialogue and new acronyms. “We’ve got enough architecture,” he says. He rejects what he calls the “conceptual grandeur” of his predecessor, preferring to focus on getting the current mechanisms to work better. Carr likes engagement and self-respect and the forthright presentation of interests. When questions about human rights emerge — as they frequently do in places like Tibet and Sri Lanka — he wants to keep talking to the relevant parties from the inside, not sling insults from the sidelines. He fears Australia’s becoming craven — a word that appears early in the book but disappears as his confidence grows in the job. He values Gareth Evans’s observation that Australia should never be the supine puppy on its back with its pink belly in the air, begging for acceptance from the United States. He fears this deeply. But Australia is not above prostration, as Carr demonstrates in the quest for votes for the UN Security Council and in the mission to keep China happy.

There are a few modest achievements during his eighteen months. He successfully urges Indonesia to ban visas on arrival for Iranians. He wins a caucus debate, allowing Australia to abstain in the vote on Palestinian observer status at the United Nations. He can claim some credit for lifting sanctions against Myanmar, which in turn triggers the European Union to follow suit. China does agree to hold annual high-level talks. But the greatest achievement is that Bob Carr got to be foreign minister after all. His life’s dream is fulfilled and through this, and through his compelling need to savour and capture this exquisite experience, we get to read an absorbing, illuminating and occasionally disturbing book about one man’s time in the job.