

Trump-Turnbull phone call: substance, not theatre, matters



Donald Trump, left, and Malcolm Turnbull's exchange and its aftermath highlight the strength of our US alliance.

Greg Sheridan, *The Australian*, 12:00AM February 4, 2017

Under the presidency of Donald Trump, the theatre — and occasionally it will be theatre of the absurd — will often mask the reality. That has been the case this past week, in which the substance has been almost exactly the reverse of the theatre.

Of course, if the theatre is loud enough and goes on long enough, it can finally overwhelm the substance.

This week has not shown that the US-Australia alliance is fragile or needs fundamental rethinking. Instead it has shown just what a strong, robust, widespread relationship it is.

Consider what really happened. Barack Obama, in the last days of his presidency, authorised a deal to take 1250 refugees, many Muslim, into the US from Manus Island and Nauru. The Turnbull government, like the Abbott government before it, had declared that nobody on either of those islands, people who tried to come to Australia illegally by boat, would be - allowed to settle permanently in Australia. Thus the American deal solved a policy and political headache for Australia. Underneath all the verbal high jinks of this week, Trump has declared several times, and his White House spokesman and the State Department have - declared several times, that he is going to honour the Obama deal.

In substance, but not in theatre, two features of this are striking.

Trump would have done this for no other country than Australia. And no other country than the US would do this for Australia. It is impossible to interpret all the tweets, statements and mixed signals of this week definitively. But one obvious interpretation is that Trump has bellyached at length and in public about how much he hates the deal in order to give himself cover with his base for implementing it. In other words, this is a deal Trump hates and would never have done himself, but he is going to honour it simply because of who it was with, namely Australia.

So Trump is doing us a favour that he would have done for no one else. And we are receiving a favour from America that we could not get from any other country, and God knows we've tried almost every country on Earth to get someone to take the people on Manus and Nauru.

More than that, Trump has actually helped Australian policy in another way. The policy danger from the American deal was that it delivered a First World immigration outcome to people who had come to Australia by boat, whereas the whole object of Canberra policy is to make sure nobody can get a First World immigration outcome by employing people--smugglers and boats. The very fact that Trump has made such a fuss about this deal, and how much he dislikes it, and how it will never happen again, and how he would never have agreed to such a deal, means that there is very little danger of anyone, even the people-smugglers, thinking that Manus and Nauru are a viable future route to resettlement in the US.

Trump's statements, which Australian opinion finds so disagreeable, will actually help maintain the deterrent quality of Australian policy.

Weird as it sounds, Trump has claims to be the injured party here.

The immigration deal was apparently signed by US and Australian officials in September but not made public until after the US presidential election. From the Australian side there were some legitimate reasons for the delay. Canberra was determined to deploy a lot of naval - assets and make sure people-smugglers did not think the announcement of this agreement meant a softening of Australian policy. This legitimately took some time.

However, it meant the deal was not announced publicly until after the election. Quite possibly, if it had been announced before the election no one in the US would have noticed it. But it would only have taken one alert American journalist to notice the announcement, and one question to Trump, or even to an authoritative Trump surrogate, to have seen the deal denounced by Trump, and then there would have been no chance at all of Trump honouring it. The fact it was signed well before the US election but then announced well after the election could lead Trump's people to feel they'd been stitched up here.

Hopefully, they will feel they were stitched up by Obama, not Turnbull.

It was Donald Rumsfeld who made famous the idea of known unknowns and unknown unknowns. We should invent a special category to capture the dishonesty and unreality of so many Obama deals and commitments: the real reals, things which were announced and

would actually happen, which were very few; and the unreal reals, things that were - announced but which would never actually happen; and the unknown unreals, things which would be announced with no idea whether they would actually happen. Obama's refugee deal seems to fall in this last category. Is it possible Obama actually planned this as one of many landmines and booby traps he left for Trump?

For all that, the leaking of a disobliging version of the Trump-Turnbull phone conversation and Trump's later tweet attacking Obama's "dumb deal" are things previous presidents would not have done and have been somewhat embarrassing for Turnbull. But there is no serious criticism to be made of Turnbull in the way he has handled all this. Nor is this a remotely unprecedented episode of a president hurting a prime minister over something he doesn't like politically.

Tony Abbott, when he was prime minister, was on Obama's absolute speed dial of world leaders whenever he wanted a favour. Yet Obama's egregious speech at the G20 in Brisbane about climate change was designed to do Abbott the maximum political harm. And it did do Abbott a lot of harm. Obama, flouting every tradition of consulting an ally and not - embarrassing an ally and a host, gave no one in the Abbott government any notice of what he planned to do in that speech. He gratuitously and inaccurately attacked Australian policy. His speech was oafishly rude in that it was made in front of the Governor-General, Australia's head of state, whom Obama did not even acknowledge.

This was a calculated act of political malevolence against an ally with whom Obama disagreed on a matter of domestic policy. So how is it liberal opinion in Australia gave Obama's words no significant reaction but is having a nervous breakdown over Trump's? Of course if Trump is seen to be continuously discourteous to Australia's leader, or to Australia generally, it will seriously erode public support for the alliance, to which Australians are deeply attached as an expression of both their deepest interests and their dearest values.

Trump should take that seriously. But what was also fascinating this week was how many Americans came out to praise Australia and praise our alliance. Republican leaders Paul Ryan and John McCain were strong and clear in their praise of the alliance. Trump's chief of staff Reince Priebus and his ideological guru Steve Bannon called Australian ambassador Joe Hockey into the White House to convey the President's admiration and respect for Australia.

Respected commentators such as David Gergen, countless former officials, even pop stars, came to Australia's defence. If anything, the week showed the opposite of what it is being said to show: it showed the depth and range of the Australian relationship across the US. But it also disclosed what we are going to have to categorise as a new medical condition: Trump derangement syndrome.

This is evident most clearly in US liberal circles and in their analogues in Europe. Trump - announced various immigration restrictions last weekend. These were implemented with extreme clumsiness and it took the administration several days to make it clear they didn't apply to US permanent residents, to dual citizens like those of Australia, Britain and European NATO members, and various others. The main restrictions were a temporary suspension of new visas for people from seven Muslim-majority countries that have

produced a lot of terrorists and the temporary suspension of the refugee program. Both these suspensions are to be lifted when the administration has “extreme vetting” procedures in place that it is satisfied with.

You can argue that these restrictions are ill-advised or excessive. But they are similar to temporary restrictions Obama occasionally applied but without fanfare and which other countries often quietly apply. Yet they resulted in a demented overreaction from liberal America and from liberal Europe, whose leaders live in terror that they are going the way of Hillary Clinton at the hands of their own Donald Trumps.

Tellingly, they have majority support from Americans.

EU boss Donald Tusk declared America a threat to Europe. Two million Brits signed a petition to keep Trump out. This was all absurd overreaction. Trump had created a - bureaucratic mess; he had not killed the firstborn of every family.

Turnbull was absolutely right not to join in this ridiculous moral panic and liberal anti-Trump jihad. And he would have been right to refrain from joining in whether we had a refugee deal at stake or not.

Trump brings us many challenges. One of them is not losing our heads.