HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Australia’s Foreign Relations

SPEECH

Thursday, 19 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
One of the most important roles of the person who holds the office of Prime Minister of Australia is to manage our international relations in a way that benefits the national interest. In fact, the annual report of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade states that one key goal of foreign policy is to have:

Australia’s national interests protected and advanced through contributions to international security, national economic and trade performance and global cooperation.

Members on our side can recall the very high expectations after the election of the current Prime Minister, who had served a lengthy stint as shadow minister for foreign affairs and who clearly regarded himself as a foreign policy expert. That was largely based, it would seem, on his work for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in the 1980s. Australia’s foreign relations would be ‘taken to a new level’ under this newly crowned expert, it was proclaimed. It is now very obvious that those expectations were grossly overinflated. But I think it is instructive and, indeed, prudent to look at some of the statements of this Prime Minister when in opposition—that is, statements he made about the coalition’s handling of foreign affairs—so that you can put in context the confected outrage we hear now when questions about his handling of foreign policy matters are raised.

In 2000, the Prime Minister inferred that John Howard was a racist and that he was an impediment to Australia forging closer relations with Indonesia. In 2001, this Prime Minister attacked the International Monetary Fund as—and, Leader of the Opposition, you will like this—a ‘flagship of global neoliberalism’. In 2002, the current Prime Minister issued a series of media releases claiming there was Australian taxpayer funded people smuggling going on in Indonesia.

Again in 2002, the current Prime Minister issued a media release repeating false claims that the coalition government was prepared to ‘dump Asia for the US alliance’. And despite saying in a speech that ‘Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction’ is ‘a matter of empirical fact’, he later changed his stance and became a scathing critic of the war in Iraq. In 2005 the current Prime Minister criticised Prime Minister Howard for saying that Australia could play a bridging role between China and the United States, but now the current Prime Minister claims that role for himself. He has variously accused the previous Prime Minister of being ‘loose with the truth’ and of ‘misleading parliament’ yet refusing to produce any evidence and many times without any evidence at all. Indeed, there are many examples of the current Prime Minister, when in opposition, using foreign policy issues to launch personal attacks and cast slurs against the then Prime Minister, the then trade minister and the then foreign minister. So, given this track record, we should not be surprised that this Prime Minister is quite prepared to exploit Australia’s important foreign relationships for domestic political gain. But, of course, this Prime Minister will ruthlessly and arrogantly use anything for domestic political purposes.

One of the first signs of this arrogance was the infamous phone call with the then President of the United States. You will recall that one. The United States of course is Australia’s most important ally, the only global superpower, the world’s leading democracy and a crucial contributor to stability and prosperity in our region. Our relationship with the United States has never been broader, deeper or closer than in the past decade or so, and relations remain strong. However, this Prime Minister was prepared to provide the media with a false version of a private conversation with the President of the United States—and not only false, but designed to make the Prime Minister look smarter than the US President, who was supposedly meant to look stupid. But an adviser to President Bush, Daniel Price, appeared on Sky television recently and exposed this once and for all. He made it very clear that President Bush had not asked the question: ‘What’s the G20?’—that is the question the Prime Minister claims he asked—because President Bush had already made the decision to elevate the role of the G20 and had already contacted world leaders about the G20. While it is hard to conceive of a circumstance where damage could be caused to the Australia-US alliance, that is no reason to take the relationship for granted and to treat our closest international friend with contempt simply to score cheap domestic political points.

This incident raised serious question marks over the Australian government’s reliability and trustworthiness, not only among Americans—Democrats and Republicans alike—but across the wider diplomatic community.
Who would take a call from a man with a track record of leaping into print on sensitive issues raised privately and confidentially? Where does this sort of behaviour lead? Remember, we have witnessed the unprecedented step of the US administration having to issue a disclaimer to the Washington Post to explicitly deny the claims made in Australia about the conversation between this Prime Minister and the then President of the United States. And we still have had no explanation from the Prime Minister about how or why this debacle came to pass.

Similarly, we have a long and valuable relationship with Japan, one of our most important trading and security partners. Relations have strengthened far beyond the traditional trade links to include cooperation between our forces in Iraq. The relationship with Japan is a valued asset. It should not be neglected, much less squandered. What were the Japanese to make of the Prime Minister’s baffling decision to exclude Tokyo from his first major trip to the region as Prime Minister? And what were our friends in Japan to make of the incredibly insensitive declaration of a ‘war’ on Japanese whaling and the decision to send an Australian government boat to collect video footage of whaling that this government then released to the media?

India, with its strength, its stability and its rising prosperity, is also a beacon for political and economic freedom. A strong and successful India is a blessing for the world. India is facing great challenges as it develops an economy to lift millions out of poverty. One of those challenges is to limit or reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, yet this Prime Minister imposed a ban on sales of uranium to India, which is striving to greatly expand its range of nuclear reactors to provide low-emission energy for its industries and cities. This Prime Minister is saying that we cannot trust India to use Australian uranium for peaceful purposes. Yet Canada has lifted a ban on uranium sales to India. Canada believes that India is a trusted friend and that the sale of uranium to India is absolutely appropriate. So not only have we missed the colossal opportunity to export uranium to one of the most developing countries in the world with huge energy needs; the Prime Minister is denying India uranium from Australia so that it is not able to expand its nuclear capability using Australian uranium.

And then we come to China. The Mandarin reading and speaking Prime Minister, it was hoped, would improve relations with the nation that is rapidly growing in importance economically but also in terms of regional stability. While there have been several well-documented stumbles in the relationship, it was brought home to me recently during a visit to Beijing that one issue takes precedence over all of the other stumbles of this government when it comes to our relationship with China. The government of China, the people of China, are deeply offended by the implication in the Prime Minister’s defence white paper that Australia regards China as a military threat. It was impressed on me repeatedly that China viewed Australia as a valuable partner who they hoped would be a long-term, reliable supplier of the resources and energy they needed to develop their economy and lift many more millions of people out of poverty. Make no mistake, the Chinese leadership have taken serious offence at the inference in this government’s white paper that China could seek to invade Australia within the next 20 years.

It is also deeply regrettable that the Labor government is overturning Australia’s longstanding bipartisan policy of refusing to support one-sided resolutions against Israel in the United Nations General Assembly. The coalition has always recognised the aspirations of the Palestinian people to self-determination. But any prospect for a lasting peace in the Middle East also requires that the Palestinian people and Israel’s neighbours recognise the right of the state of Israel to exist and the right of the people of Israel to live within secure borders. This must be the crucial foundation for any durable two-state solution. Resolutions at the United Nations General Assembly that speak only of Palestinian rights to a homeland yet make no reference to the right of the state of Israel to exist are inflammatory and counterproductive. This is especially so when key backers of these resolutions such as Iran speak openly of seeking the destruction of the state of Israel.

Late last year we first saw a shift in Australia’s voting patterns for United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the conflict in the Middle East. It is disappointing that the Australian government has again voted in support of such a resolution. We in the opposition again express our hope that the Labor government is not trading on fundamental questions of principle in order to attract support at the United Nations for the Prime Minister’s personal campaign to win a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

More than 60 years ago the Australian government was one of the first countries to vote in support of the creation of the state of Israel at the United Nations. It has not been the traditional practice of Australian governments to adopt or endorse some of the one-sided resolutions against Israel that now come before the United Nations. This government has now voted in favour of three of these resolutions. Why? Why have they done this? We can only assume it is to do with the Prime Minister’s effort to garner votes for his personal crusade to secure a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Australia should never get into the business of trading on principle or on our support of Israel simply to gather votes for the campaign for the Security Council. It is a slippery slope. If some principles are compromised, where will this government stop?
Most recent in the list of the Prime Minister’s foreign policy difficulties has been Indonesia and the circumstances surrounding the *Oceanic Viking*. The Prime Minister, with megaphone diplomacy, announced that he had struck a deal with President Yudhoyono. In other words, the failure of his government to protect our borders was now a problem for Indonesia to resolve. It became known as the ‘Indonesian solution’. The Prime Minister and his ministers repeatedly called on Indonesia to honour their side of the bargain. In other words, the government had made it Indonesia’s problem. They outsourced to Indonesia the problem caused by this government’s failure to keep our borders intact and to maintain the integrity of an orderly immigration program.

Indonesia is undoubtedly and conspicuously one of the great new stories of this decade. It is a flourishing democracy. The re-election of President Yudhoyono marked an explicit repudiation by Indonesians of those espousing extremism. We are supportive of any effort to ensure that our relationship with Indonesia is one of close cooperation and mutual respect. What are the Indonesians to make of the fact that this government has repeatedly turned to Indonesia and directed all criticism of the Indonesian solution to the Indonesians: the Indonesians should get these people off the boat; the Indonesians should provide support; the Indonesians should provide detention facilities; the Indonesians have to resolve the Labor government’s policy failures?

But in this whole Indonesian solution they did not stop with Indonesia. They then went to New Zealand and said that New Zealand had to take the people off the *Oceanic Viking*, then the Philippines, and, what about Sri Lanka? In this attempt to cover up the shambles of the failure, the colossal policy failure on behalf of the Labor government, they have chosen to use the relationships that have been built up over many years with Australia’s neighbours to cover up their failures. They have used foreign policy to score cheap domestic political points. All Australians should condemn this government’s failings on foreign policy.

It is summed up by the government’s Asia-Pacific community where the Prime Minister announced that the architecture of the Asia-Pacific would be realigned in accordance with his vision of a European Union community and yet he did not contact one other country to consult. *(Time expired)*