

Australian prime minister ridicules Trump as a buffoon and Russian stooge

By James Cogan
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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull lampooned Donald Trump during his speech to the “Canberra Press Gallery Mid-Winter Ball” on June 14. The audience, consisting of leading representatives of all parliamentary parties and prominent editors and journalists of the Australian media, roared with laughter, loudly applauded, and even cheered.

It is a tradition at the event for both the prime minister and the leader of the parliamentary opposition to deliver self-deprecating and “humorous” remarks. Turnbull, however, exploited that tradition to deliver what can only be interpreted as an attack on the current American president. He portrayed Donald Trump as an incompetent buffoon at best, and mentally unhinged at worst.

Mimicking and mocking Trump’s speaking style, Turnbull said: “The Donald and I, we are winning and winning in the polls. We are winning so much, we are winning, we are winning like we have never won before. We are winning in the polls. We are, we are. Not the fake polls. Not the fake polls. They’re the ones we’re not winning in....”

Most controversially, Turnbull proceeded to identify himself with the claims in the US that Trump won the presidential election with Russian assistance. Polls, the Australia leader ostensibly joked, “are so easy to win. I know that. Did you know that? I kind of know that. They are so easy to win. I have this Russian guy.”

Another tradition of the midwinter ball is that the media representatives in attendance do not report what is said. Turnbull’s ridiculing of Trump, however, was promptly “leaked” to Channel 9 political editor Laurie Oakes—who did not attend the event—and broadcast.

Oakes suggested in his initial report that Turnbull may have believed Trump would not find out. This notion is simply not credible. US diplomats were sitting

in the audience. Dozens of people were videoing and recording the speech with mobile phones, with at least one then uploading portions of it to Instagram.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Australian prime minister wanted his resentment of, and contempt for, the American president made public. And it now is. Virtually every major American television network and newspaper, along with media outlets around the world, to some extent reported it.

The message sent by Turnbull was unmistakable. The sympathies and support of his government lie with the faction of the American ruling class—which includes the Democratic Party, powerful Republican figures such as Senator John McCain, the US intelligence agencies, and much of the American media—that is seeking to undermine and potentially remove Trump with unsubstantiated allegations he is a stooge of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Turnbull made his remarks just two weeks after McCain gave a speech in Sydney in which he denounced Trump and his “America First” economic nationalism and labelled Putin the “premier and most important threat in the world.” McCain appealed to Australia to “stick with us [the US]” despite concerns in the country’s establishment over Trump’s policies, such as the repudiation of the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), an anti-China trading bloc in Asia.

McCain held extensive private talks with Turnbull and senior government and military figures, where he no doubt conveyed his views in far more blunt terms (see: “Senator McCain solicits support in Australia for Trump’s removal”).

Turnbull’s midwinter ball remarks also followed a speech in Australia by former US director of national intelligence James Clapper, who condemned Trump for his “inexplicably solicitous stance” toward Russia. In

particularly pointed remarks, Clapper referred to Trump as the “transitory occupant of the White House” and said investigations would determine whether there was a “smoking gun” linking the president to Moscow. Like McCain, Clapper appealed to Australia to remain steadfastly with the US alliance (see: “Former US director of national intelligence campaigns against Trump in Australia”).

Both Turnbull’s Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party opposition have avoided any public statement on the political warfare and instability in Washington, or making overt criticism of the Trump administration.

Instead, during visits to Canberra by Vice President Mike Pence, a visit to New York by Turnbull to meet with Trump, and ministerial meetings with Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Turnbull and other representatives of Australian imperialism vowed ongoing allegiance to its alliance with the US. They have given sweeping commitments to stand with Washington against China and Russia, and in the US-led wars in the Middle East.

With geo-strategic tensions simmering between the US and China, the Australian intelligence agencies and media are waging a vicious campaign against alleged Chinese political interference in the country’s politics (see: “Australian media widens campaign against Chinese ‘influence’”).

US-Australian military integration is continuing to expand, with the latest rotation of American marines in northern Australia now underway, and preparations taking place for the massive Talisman Sabre joint exercise in July, which will involve over 30,000 troops from both countries.

At the same time, McCain’s reference to the US abandonment of the TPP underscored differences between the Australian ruling elite and the Trump White House. Protectionist “America First” measures that impact on Australian exports to China, Japan, South Korea, the US itself or other global markets could plunge the country into deep recession and generate bitter political recriminations.

From the outset of Trump’s administration, the tensions over Australia’s angst over his policies were reflected, in a bizarre form, in the stormy first phone call between the new president and Turnbull. Trump, ignoring diplomatic protocols, launched into a tirade

against Turnbull’s government over an agreement made under Barack Obama for the US to take some refugees denied entry to Australia. He then reportedly hung up on the Australian leader.

Turnbull’s remarks were, in that context, a calculated signal. Australia will stand with the US, but not at any price. Certain policies of Trump and the layers around him are a potential threat to relations and the Australian ruling class would prefer to be working with someone else.

Overall, Turnbull’s midwinter ball performance has been downplayed. The US embassy declared it was taken “with the good humour that was intended.” The White House, however, and Trump himself, have not yet made any response.

In the Australian establishment and media, a distinct hint of nervousness about this fact is evident. Australia’s ambassador to the US, Joe Hockey, joked last night that he had not yet been expelled from Washington.

Turnbull’s remarks can be dismissed as a bit of fun at Trump’s expense. Among the president’s factional supporters, however, it will be interpreted for what it was: the Australian prime minister taking sides in the ever-more ferocious political warfare in Washington.

In one form or another, there will be consequences.

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