

Congressional Support for Australia Has Paid Dividends with the Trump Administration

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The US Congress offered broad-ranging, bipartisan support for Australia immediately after reports that President Trump badgered, bragged and abruptly ended his January phone call with Prime Minister Turnbull.¹ More than fifty US Representatives and Senators—including many of the most senior members of Congress—took to Twitter, the media and even the Senate floor to reaffirm Australia's importance as a US ally.

While it is impossible to determine the extent to which congressional push-back shaped the President's subsequent actions, at the very least the congressional response created a context that helped rather than hindered Australia's interests with the 45th President. The White House cannot have missed such a strong expression of congressional dismay regarding President Trump's treatment of the Australian Prime Minister.

This commentary suggests that Australia has benefited from the outpouring of congressional support in early February: the Trump Administration adopted a far more positive approach towards Australia in the nine months since the phone call. First, the President personally committed to honour the US-Australia refugee deal that is at odds with his political platform. Second, Trump's tone towards Australia has become much more affirmative—he showed little sense of Australia's history of shared sacrifice in the alliance during the phone call, but adopted a somewhat regular presidential tone during public remarks commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea. Third, it is significant that the three most important cabinet members for Australia—Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson—all visited Sydney within the first six months of the Trump Administration.

¹ Greg Miller and Phillip Rucker, "This Was the Worst Call by Far": Trump Badgered, Bragged and Abruptly Ended Phone Call with Australian Leader', *Washington Post*, 2 February 2017, <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/no-gday-mate-on-call-with-australian-pm-trump-badgers-and-brags/2017/02/01/88a3bfb0-e8bf-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html?utm_term=.3a6d834e8c33> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

An Outpouring of Support

The congressional response to the infamous Trump-Turnbull phone call was overwhelming. More than sixty members of Congress reportedly contacted Australian Ambassador Joe Hockey to express their solidarity.² Senator John McCain, the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, issued a stand-alone statement labelling Australia “one of America’s oldest friends and staunchest allies” and offered his “unwavering support” for the alliance.³

McCain’s early intervention triggered a strong, bipartisan public response from senior US Representatives and Senators. Paul Ryan, the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, said Australia was a “very central ally ... and they will continue to be” in his weekly press briefing. Congressman Steny Hoyer, the number two Democrat in the House, and Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat who has served California in the Senate for over twenty years, were similarly vocal in their support for the alliance during media engagements. Senior Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander, the chair of the Senate Health Committee, went to the Senate floor to dedicate an entire five minute speech to Australia.⁴ At least five senators—John McCain, the Senate Armed Services Committee’s top Democrat Jack Reed, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, as well as Cory Gardner and Tammy Duckworth—tweeted about their phone calls with Australian Ambassador Joe Hockey.⁵ According to United States Studies Centre CEO Simon Jackman, “the value and depth of Australia’s relationship with the United States [has] had the best media cycle in the US I can recall in my lifetime of studying politics in both countries.”⁶

In both the Senate and the House, identical resolutions were introduced to underscore Congress’s “strong commitment to the United States-Australia alliance relationship”, and state that Australia was a “partner crucial to the preservation of United States national interests”.⁷ The Senate resolution

² Cameron Stewart, ‘John McCain: The Ally-in-Chief Drops in’, *The Australian*, 29 May 2017.

³ John McCain, ‘Statement by SASC Chairman John McCain on U.S.-Australia Alliance’, Media Release, 2 Feb 2017, <www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/2/statement-by-sasc-chairman-john-mccain-on-u-s-australia-alliance> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

⁴ Lamar Alexander, ‘The People of the U.S. Do Not Have Better Friends than the People of Australia’, YouTube, 6 February 2017, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUpKPwPhj-s> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

⁵ Dougal Robinson, ‘Congress Rallies around Australia’, *the interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 9 February 2017, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/congress-rallies-around-australia> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

⁶ Simon Jackman, ‘Refugee Deal Surviving First Contact Speaks Volumes about US-Australia Alliance’, *Australian Financial Review*, 3 February 2017, <www.afr.com/news/world/us-election/refugee-deal-surviving-first-contact-speaks-volumes-about-us-australia-alliance-says-simon-jackman-20170202-gu4d7o> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

⁷ Ben Cardin, ‘Bipartisan Senators Introduce Resolution Reaffirming Strong U.S.-Australia Alliance’, Media Release, 7 February 2017, <www.cardin.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/bipartisan-senators-introduce-resolution-reaffirming-strong-us-australia-alliance> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

attracted the bipartisan support of fourteen senators, including the top Democrat on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Ben Cardin, and former Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio. The number of signatories to these congressional resolutions in the House and the Senate was almost fifty, albeit with far more Democrats than Republicans across the two chambers.⁸

Moreover, just two members of Congress criticised a deal that had previously been unpopular among the Republican conference. Context is important: a number of Republicans had called for President-elect Trump to pull out of the deal while President Obama remained in office during the 'lame duck' period.⁹ Yet only two members of Congress criticised the agreement following the Washington Post report of the Trump-Turnbull phone call that catapulted details of the Obama-era refugee deal into mainstream consciousness in Washington. Both Senator Chuck Grassley and Representative Louie Gohmert raised objections to the specific details in the deal in February, although neither called for President Trump to abandon it. It is telling that no member of Congress deemed it appropriate to push back against Australia over the deal. The contrast is instructive—in the aftermath of the phone call, congressional opposition to the refugee deal was distinctly muted whereas well over fifty members of Congress implicitly criticised President Trump by offering outright support for Australia.

The Benefits for Australia

The President and his inner circle cannot have missed the high-level congressional reaffirmations of Australia's value as a US ally. In addition to widespread media coverage of the phone call and congressional responses to the President's behaviour, then White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer received several questions at his press briefings about Australia and the refugee deal.¹⁰ It is not possible to determine the impact of the congressional response on the Trump Administration's subsequent approach to Australia. However, US Presidents—even President Trump—are influenced by congressional sentiment during deliberations over both domestic and foreign policy. President Trump closely follows the media attention generated by key Representatives and Senators and is very concerned with how the media covers his administration.

⁸ In early June, the Resolutions had attracted fourteen co-sponsors in the Senate and thirty-three in the House.

⁹ Dougal Robinson, 'Australia's Refugee Deal Will Be Early Test of Relations with Trump', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 January 2017, <www.afr.com/news/politics/world/australias-refugee-deal-will-be-early-test-of-relations-with-trump-20170112-gtqow6> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

¹⁰ For example, Josh Butler, 'Australia-U.S. Refugee Deal: Chaos as White House Gives Conflicting Reports', *HuffPost*, 1 February 2017, <www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/01/31/u-s-will-take-1250-australian-refugees-subject-to-extreme-vet_a_21704341/> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

For President Trump, the feedback loop after the phone call was highly negative—the story dominated Twitter and cable news, as well as making national and global headlines. The congressional response to the phone call drove the media cycle, because such vocal, bipartisan criticism of a new president is highly unusual. It was the first time in the weeks-old Trump Presidency that several senior Republicans had simultaneously aired differences with the White House. At a minimum, the strength of the congressional response demonstrated to the President that, in future, he could expect widespread criticism if he upset the pro-Australian constituency on Capitol Hill.

It is unlikely to be a mere coincidence that President Trump adopted a favourable approach to Australia in the nine months since the phone call. First, the Trump Administration is honouring the Obama-era refugee deal that was the focus of the unpleasant phone call and was described by President Trump as a “dumb deal” that would get him “killed” politically. The first fifty refugees on Manus Island and Nauru were resettled in the United States in September.¹¹ Trump had previously confirmed that he would honour the deal in New York in May.¹² And in April, Vice President Pence had said the deal would go ahead, declaring: “we’ll honour this agreement, out of respect for that enormously important alliance”. But Pence also flagged the Administration’s aversion to the deal: “it doesn’t mean we admire the agreement”.¹³

It is very significant that the Trump Administration is carrying out an Obama-era agreement that it openly dislikes. The deal runs counter to Trump’s litany of comments on refugees and ongoing efforts to impose a ‘travel ban’ on people from six Muslim-majority nations. The congressional response to the phone call was not necessarily the primary reason that the Trump Administration decided to honour the deal—perhaps the administration would have honoured it nonetheless. But it was an important litmus test, which indicated that President Trump would not encounter serious domestic opposition should he honour the deal.

Second, President Trump’s tone towards Australia was positive during his first face-to-face meeting with Prime Minister Turnbull. Trump had shown little sense of Australia’s history of shared sacrifice in the alliance during his

¹¹ Josh Butler, ‘Just 50 Refugees on Manus, Nauru to Initially Resettle in Trump’s America’, *HuffPost*, 20 September 2017, <www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/09/19/just-4-percent-of-asylum-seekers-on-manus-nauru-to-initially-resettle-in-trumps-america_a_23215635/> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

¹² Transcript: Journalist: “Do you think you can you put the refugee deal behind you and move on?” POTUS: “Oh yeah sure. That’s all worked out. That has been worked out for a long time.” See Rosie Lewis, ‘Donald Trump, Malcolm Turnbull Meet in New York: Live Coverage’, *The Australian*, 5 May 2017.

¹³ Jacqueline Williams, ‘Mike Pence, on Charm Offensive in Australia, Confirms ‘Historic Alliance’, *New York Times*, 21 April 2017, <www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/australia/mike-pence-visit-sydney-turnbull.html?_r=1> [Accessed 30 October 2017].

phone call with Turnbull. Yet on the USS *Intrepid*, he spoke of the “iron bonds” between the United States and Australia, forged in the waters of the Pacific during the Battle of the Coral Sea.¹⁴ And he went much further, praising the alliance in effusive terms that could easily have come from Presidents Barack Obama or George W. Bush: “Americans have had no better friends than the Australians. We are proudly and profoundly grateful for Australia’s contributions in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and the fight against terrorism following September 11.” One can never be sure whether Trump believes everything he says, but his approach in New York nonetheless represented a somewhat ‘normal’ presidential approach to Australia that was welcomed by Congress.

Third, the three most important members of President Trump’s cabinet, from an Australian point of view, all visited Sydney within the first six months of the administration. Vice President Pence arrived in April, the earliest visit ever by vice president in a new administration.¹⁵ Pence, a pro-trade, pro-alliance Republican is natural friend of Australia, but his decision to visit within the first 100 days of his term likely owes in part to the congressional response to the phone call. For Pence, who was previously the Republican Conference Chairman (the number three position in the Republican Party in the House) and serves as the administration’s point person on Congress, visiting Australia suited both a personal and congressional desire to reassure Australia. It is significant that Pence spent two days in Australia on his first trip to Asia as Vice-President, as part of an itinerary that also included the more traditional destinations of Japan and South Korea. Similarly, Secretaries Tillerson and Mattis visited Sydney for AUSMIN just over five months into the Trump Administration. Even though the annual meeting was long overdue (it had last occurred in October 2015), it is always difficult to schedule AUSMIN meetings in Australia. Therefore, it is notable that the Secretaries of State and Defense valued the alliance to the point that they coordinated their travel schedules and flew to Australia for AUSMIN in the early months of the administration.

Other factors were at play in each of these developments, including the Australian Government’s direct engagement with the Trump Administration. Nonetheless, and although it is impossible to prove conclusively, it seems highly likely that the forceful demonstration of congressional support for Australia and criticism of President Trump in February has had subsequent benefits for Australia. In the Trump era, engagement with Congress has re-emerged as a particularly valuable aspect of the US-Australia relationship. Australia can continue to achieve much with a Congress that has the constitutional power and the political will to moderate President Trump’s less helpful impulses.

¹⁴ Lewis, ‘Donald Trump, Malcolm Turnbull Meet in New York’.

¹⁵ Williams, ‘Mike Pence, on Charm Offensive in Australia’.

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