

# Playing diplomatic games

## Don Rothwell

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Reporter: Ross Peake

AUSTRALIAN diplomacy will be tested in September when Shinzo Abe becomes the first Japanese Prime Minister to address Federal Parliament. There will be speeches, toasts and smiles but the bonhomie will be juxtaposed by anger at Japan's senseless slaughter of whales.

Japan says eating whale meat is an essential part of its culture, a claim scoffed at by most other nations. As a result, Japan failed to win a single ballot at the recent International Whaling Commission conference in Anchorage.

Japan is a rich nation that doesn't need to eat whale meat. Australia is a rich nation that doesn't eat whale meat and sees more profit for all nations from whale watching rather than whale harpooning. So what can be done about the two irreconcilable viewpoints? Somewhere between zero and zilch, it seems. And in the middle is diplomacy, the art of subtly and skilfully handling a situation.

Our bitter wartime foe has been our most important trading partner for decades. Early this year, China's rush for our coal and gas put it in the top spot. These two nations are too important to Australia's economic future to allow a spat over whales or the Dalai Lama to take precedence. Therefore, Abe will be treated with courtesy, as befits his office.

Australia has been involved in many diplomatic rows and there will be many more.

The rifts are inevitable as each nation puts its national interest first. Therefore the US puts its inefficient farmers first, despite the so-called special relationship between George Bush and John Howard.

The national interest is also impervious to megaphone diplomacy. Governing in the national interest also means your neighbour's remarks are often misinterpreted, sometimes deliberately.

The troubled poor nations of the South Pacific often accuse Australia and New Zealand of bullying. Asian nations regularly say Western powers are racist. Middle Eastern countries say the West stereotypes Muslims. And China is just so damned frustrated that the Dalai Lama is treated like the Pope.

Australia should have handled his latest tour much better. Howard could have calibrated expectations by saying he would meet the visitor as a religious leader. That is what he finally did yesterday, anyway, but only after playing coy for weeks.

At first, he said there wouldn't be a meeting. He remembers after meeting the Dalai Lama in 1996, just after he became PM, Beijing threatened trade bans. The bluff worked and Howard kept his door closed when the Dalai Lama returned in 2002.

A few months ago, Howard said he'd look at his diary, reacting to public outrage that he was kow-towing to Beijing. On Tuesday, when the Dalai Lama came to Canberra,

Howard was still not confirming anything. Later that day, his office said a mutually convenient time slot would be found later in the week.

The bottom line is Beijing is all hot air and noise on this issue. It fulminated at Australia for allowing the Dalai Lama to preach "splitist" teachings. He did no such thing. At the low-key reception with MPs in Parliament House, he repeated his consistent view that he wanted limited autonomy for his home land, and preservation of Tibetan culture.

Professor Don Rothwell from the ANU says China's protest can be characterised as bullying. "From time to time, Australia is seen in its own backyard as adopting a similar type of approach, especially with countries in the South Pacific," he says. "Some of the rhetoric that our political leaders use from time to time does touch off some sensitivities, certainly in places like Honiara and Port Moresby."

Dr Glen Barclay, also from the ANU, says the Chinese protests are theatre. "They strike an attitude, sound indignant and it doesn't mean a damn thing and so long as we are fully aware of this without actually showing we are no harm is done," he says.

Yesterday's meeting between Howard and the Dalai Lama could increase temporary tensions with China but the issue that is more sensitive is the proposed United States missile shield. Beijing bristles at the thought of containment of its ambitions. Therefore, China was tense when officials from Australia, Japan, the US and India met last month to discuss a security alliance.

When Howard came to office in 1996, his previous lack of interest in foreign affairs was derided. Inevitably, he quickly became immersed in international affairs, putting Australia's interests on the world stage, even though that meant appearing in silly shirts at APEC summits.

His leadership in East Timor and the Solomons was outstanding. He sent in troops and police to help the local people, and in turn protect Australia's national interest against the possibility of terrorist cells gaining a foothold in a failed state on our doorstep.

Rothwell says bickering between neighbours is usually about issues of important principle to both sides. "Those are sometimes matters which relate to sensitivities that revolve around questions of cultural perspectives, and misunderstandings about the different legal, cultural and political regimes that exist in both countries," he says. "Over the last 12 to 18 months there has been a vast array of spats [involving Australia]. So friendly nations do this all the time. Even with the United States, there is a prospect that we are going to become involved in a trade dispute before the WTO, joining the Canadians."

Rothwell says a classic case of diplomatic stress was caused by the so-called Howard doctrine. It was suggested Australia would use military force against terrorist bases in another country if they were planning to launch an attack on Australia. "This quickly sparked a fierce reaction from the region," Rothwell says.

It was rightly seen in foreign capitals as Australia proposing to invade neighbours who could not be trusted to keep terrorist cells under control. Rothwell says Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer then used the media to project moderate comments, demonstrating how the media is used for the conduct of foreign policy.

Barclay questions why Howard continues to align Australia so closely with the United States. "It does not seem to make any kind of sense in rational terms that we do seem to be aligning ourselves ever more closely with an American administration that we know is going to be out of office by early 2009," he says. "We know American policy is going to change and we also know that the Democrats will be out for revenge and people who are least likely to get any favours from them are the ones who have been most closely associated with the Republicans."

He says the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement is a misnomer.

"The only thing that we want greater access to American markets for is agricultural products and we're not going to get it because Congress will never risk losing the votes of the agricultural states," he says.

Barclay says the so-called special relationship with the US does not exist. "If [Tony] Blair couldn't work out a realistic special relationship with the United States, we certainly can't. The only country the United States has a special relationship with, the only one that it falls backwards doing favours for, is Israel."

Howard will be on the international stage again in September when he hosts the APEC summit. His mate Bush will be there, along with the Japanese and Chinese leaders.

Climate change will be on the diplomatic agenda, while whaling will be on minds outside the summit, although Greenpeace will have to jostle with anarchists for space to wave its banners.

Since all politics is local, Howard has a lot to gain by holding firm against whaling.

"It would certainly seem objectively that the Japanese are in a totally indefensible position. Kevin Rudd's suggestion of using the Navy to keep them out could strike a very strong populist note," Barclay says.

Australia's principal diplomat is Downer whose past continues to haunt. Keating! The Musical gave him heaps, with Eddie Perfect portraying him as a demented Frank N. Furter in fishnet stockings. "I'm too freaky," he sang, explaining why Downer was Opposition Leader for only a short stint. Downer loves his job which is fortunate, because you there will be many more diplomatic rifts for him to sort.

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