

Let them eat cake: Malcolm Turnbull won't rise to 'resistance'

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When Malcolm Turnbull was asked yesterday about the shooting down of the Russian jet and the fight in Syria against Islamic State, his response was prime ministerial, sober, balanced ... and as far from cake as he could get.

At a time of international tensions, domestic terror fears and shifting pressures and demands it was the best place to be — nowhere near internal backbiting and recrimination and petty politics about whether Tony Abbott gave a chocolate cake to conservative friends being dubbed “the resistance”.

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister's security statement to parliament on Syria and Iraq was universally viewed as a “slapdown” to the public statements of his predecessor, which only distracted from the core message to the public.

Yesterday, Turnbull underlined the mortal danger and confusion facing US, Russian, Turkish and Australian pilots over Syria and urged calm, restraint and a search for long-term peace in the war-torn nation.

He repeated his Tuesday parliamentary remarks “as the Australian Prime Minister” on defence and security, pointing out our military commitment in Syria as “part of the collective defence of Iraq” and the desire for “momentum to a political resolution”.

Turnbull pointed out that he had spoken in recent days to the presidents of Turkey, Russia and the US about Syria and was concentrating on keeping Australians safe.

While repeating the need to keep calm and be restrained, Turnbull did not add any of his parliamentary flourishes about this not being the time for “gestures and machismo”, nor did he provide any commentary on the undesirability or danger of Australia's “unilateral intervention in Syria” or “a mass invasion”.

The jibes about machismo were directed against Abbott and former defence minister Kevin Andrews, who publicly advocated, from the backbench, a greater military presence — SAS forces on missions — in Syria.

Turnbull's public putdown added to a growing atmosphere of paranoia and resentment between thwarted conservative Coalition MPs and those who supported Turnbull's seizure of the leadership ten weeks ago.

Yet the idea of considering limited “boots on the ground” is not limited to a coterie of Abbott supporters, with West Australian Liberal Luke Simpkins, one of the signatories of the leadership spill against Abbott in February, telling parliament it was something we “need to do”.

It's also clear that leaks to the media and conspiracy theories about secret lunches, including Abbott bringing a chocolate cake; complaints on Abbott and his colleagues speaking out; and potential damage to Turnbull's standing on security are growing into dangerous divisions which can become entrenched and corrosive.

Turnbull's more restrained reaction yesterday is indicative of an awareness that no matter how annoyed or frustrated he is by Abbott's pursuit of a policy of greater military involvement to defeat Daesh in Syria, he cannot let it blur his judgment on the reassurance he is giving the public.

What's more, having a prime minister use a security address to parliament as an instrument to respond to a backbencher — albeit one who was prime minister only two months ago — devalues his own message and simultaneously emboldens and enrages Abbott.

Turnbull needs to adopt John Howard's attitude towards Malcolm Fraser's public criticisms of his government and policies — politely ignore it and, if it's right, quietly absorb it.