

Paris withdrawal a dangerous delusion tempting the right

Paul Kelly, The Australian, 12:00AM June 3, 2017

The emphatic decision of the Turnbull government to stand by the Paris climate change agreement despite the withdrawal announcement of the Trump administration is right on every count — policy, diplomatic and political.

The small band from the deluded Right that sees Donald Trump's decision as an opportunity for Australia to follow suit roams a lost wilderness.

How does Australia gain by being Trump's lapdog in his repudiation of international action by more than 190 nations?

The "all the way with Trump" brigade misreads the economics and is brainless about the history. Its myth-making knows almost no limits. Remember, John Howard was seriously hurt in the prelude to the 2007 election by his refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol — a political gift to Kevin Rudd.

If Turnbull decided to quit the Paris Agreement he might as well just give Bill Shorten the keys to The Lodge. America is big and ugly but Australia would invite global retaliation and marginalisation.

The reality was spelt out yesterday when the major business groups, unions, and the energy and environmental lobby endorsed Turnbull's decision. Standing by the Paris Agreement helps policy stability. It affirms the government's commitment to the 26-28 per cent emission reduction target by 2030, a critical benchmark for investment in the energy sector — though it must be buttressed by new policies.

The decision means Australia stands by its word. It shows Australia is bearing a proportional share of the burden in emission reductions, given it contributes only 1.4 per cent of global emissions.

Finally, it means that Australia is "inside the tent" on this project; the safest place to be.

Trump's decision was no surprise. It honoured his campaign pledge. But his denunciation of the agreement and his argument that it will cost US jobs and prosperity, is unfair to America, and involves a wealth redistribution to other nations will become a lightning rod for the populist Right in this country.

It is sure to be taken up by many anti-Turnbull conservatives. Tony Abbott's stand will be vital. Trump's action will seriously weaken global action on climate change. It will undermine but not destroy the Paris accord. It is a tragic move because, coming after his demolition of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, it shows America walking away from global leadership and responsibility.

Because the Paris compact is non-binding, goodwill and shared endeavour are critical. Under Trump the US joins Syria and Nicaragua in staying aloof.

This is a frightening event because there is no substitute for the US role.