

Donald Trump's conversation with Malcolm Turnbull reveals PM's refugee swap deal is a sham

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MALCOLM Turnbull has conspired with Donald Trump to cook up a fraud of a people swap that puts Australians potentially in more danger. That is the clear message from the leaked transcript of the first conversation between our Prime Minister and the then newly elected President of the United States.

Ignore the commentators who say the transcript shows Turnbull in "one of his finest moments as Prime Minister" being a "tough negotiator" and "forceful in defending Australia's interests".

Wrong. The transcript shows Turnbull trying desperately to save a deal that was in his own interests, and not Australia's. It shows Turnbull telling Trump he'd take in "not-very-attractive" people the US was trying to get rid of — "anyone you want us to take" — in exchange for Trump just pretending he might take our own unwanted boat people still on Manus Island and Nauru.

The transcript of the two leaders' January 28 phone call confirms Trump was furious with the deal predecessor Barack Obama had made with Turnbull to take up to 1250 of our boat people on Manus Island and Nauru.

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This directly contradicted Trump's promise to stop taking in refugees from jihadist countries. "I signed an executive order saying that we are not taking anybody in," fumed Trump. "I will be seen as a weak and ineffective leader in my first week by these people. This is a killer."

But then Turnbull made a suggestion. Trump could just pretend to honour the deal, while taking next to none of our boat people. "Every individual is subject to your vetting," he assured Trump. "You can decide to take 1000 or 100. It is entirely up to you. The obligation is to only go through the process."

Trump finally got it: "Suppose I vet them closely and I do not take any?"

And this is the con that Turnbull agreed to: "That is the point I have been trying to make." But this was only one half of the sham deal that could have the US taking as few as zero (according to Trump) or 100 (according to Turnbull) of our boat people.



The leaked records revealed what PM Malcolm Turnbull was willing to accept in exchange for the refugees. Picture: Brendan Smialowski

The other half is what Turnbull had secretly agreed to do for the US in exchange. And this is the most disturbing part of the conversation.

Turnbull told Trump that if he stuck by the deal “we will then hold up our end of the bargain by taking in our country 31 (inaudible) that you need to move on from ... Basically, we are taking people from the previous (Obama) administration that they were very keen on getting out of the United States. We will take more.

“We will take anyone that you want us to take ... “So we would rather take a not-very-attractive guy that helps you out than to take a Nobel Peace Prize winner that comes by boat.”

All commentators assumed Turnbull was referring to his promise last year to take refugees from Costa Rica (which Turnbull had until now denied was a quid pro quo). That meant assuming that Turnbull’s reference to “31” was a transcription error. It also meant accepting that Turnbull misspoke in referring to the Costa Rican refugees as “not-very-attractive” people that the Obama administration was “very keen on getting out of the United States” when they are in fact in Central America and not even a US responsibility.



The US is still holding 31 suspected jihadists in Guantamano Bay.

Such a deal would be bad enough.

Why is our government agreeing to take in just “anyone” from Costa Rica, including “not-very-attractive” guys? I can see why it might help Turnbull by letting him pretend to be fixing the standoff with boat people on Nauru and Manus Island.

But how does it help Australians to import any number of “not-very-attractive” people that the US is “very keen” to get rid of?

But here is a bizarre coincidence. What if “31” is not a transcription error? What if Turnbull did not misspeak? See, there are indeed 31 unattractive people that Obama was very keen to get out of the US.

They are the 31 remaining suspected jihadists still held by the US in Guantánamo Bay, excluding 10 others who have been charged or convicted of terrorism. The Prime Minister’s office assures me the reference to “31” is not just a “pure, 100 per cent coincidence” but indeed also a transcription error.

So the question remains: who are the “not-very-attractive” people Turnbull will take from the US?

And why on earth would we want them?