

AUSTRALIAN NOTES

John Stone

Dear Paul

Three major articles by the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly, and Tony Abbott's even more major Heritage Foundation speech in Washington, DC, have focused attention on Donald Trump and (according to Kelly) his influence on Australian conservatives. Kelly's first article, 'Seduction by Trump is corruption of conservatism' (11/07) attacked what he depicts as Australian conservatives' attitude towards Trump. Abbott's speech, 'Taking Trump seriously' (12/07) followed; then Kelly's second article, 'Wake up, world: Trump's in charge' (14-15/07), reflecting Abbott's speech and attendance at the annual Australian American Leadership Dialogue in Washington; and finally, his most violently anti-Trump piece, 'Friends betrayed, foes rewarded: Trump's Russian reset' (18/07). Against that background I write...

Dear Paul, Given your vast journalistic experience, you may think me presumptuous in saying you were largely talking nonsense on July 11. And although I was glad to see your article on Trump a few days later benefiting from Abbott's speech, your July 18 piece lapsed back into even more violent anti-Trumpism. Really, Paul, from one of your stature, all this wasn't good enough. On July 11 you assailed Trump and asserted that Australian conservatives' 'infatuation' with him 'constitutes the corruption of conservatism' – 'the more conservatives applaud Trump, the more they destroy the foundations of their belief', as they 'succumb to Trump's temptations, spell-binding populism and victories against the progressive establishments they hate'. This was just silly. As Abbott's outstanding speech next day showed, conservatives (many of them writing for this journal) are perfectly capable of discerning Trump's weaknesses even while applauding his achievements. They applaud his nominating Supreme Court judges who, as newly nominated Judge Kavanaugh said, are sworn to 'interpret the law and not make the law', and only wish our governments

had been as scrupulous in protecting our Constitution. (Astonishingly, you saw this as Trump delivering 'a 5-4 Supreme Court conservative majority that can reshape US social and political outcomes for a generation!'). Yet that applause does not prevent them deploring his mercantilist views on international trade, while conceding he has a point even there – namely, the unconscionable exploitation by (in particular) the Chinese and the Europeans in failing to play by the international trading rules they signed up to.

Yes, Trump is a transactional President. But that does not deny the fact that, having largely built our post-War world, America has since consistently received the rough end of the pineapple. He stands, you say, 'for a populist "America first" nationalism'. (If only we had a Minister and Department of Foreign Affairs of whom the equivalent could be said). 'Populist' is a word much in vogue nowadays among self-appointed 'opinion forming' elites who decry any suggestion that governments should listen to those who elect them. Your 'populist', Paul, may be my 'fighter for freedom'.

In a seminal paragraph, you said conservatives 'applaud Trump for specifics – being tough on [you omitted 'illegal'] immigrants, withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, huge company tax cuts [you omitted 'and personal tax cuts'], attacking political correctness and reshaping the Supreme Court'. They do indeed, wishing that our own government would focus equally on matters of concern to them, such as energy prices. But their mistake, you claim, 'is elemental. ... They forget what Trump's alternative and incoherent "big picture" means for America and the world'. No, they don't. They see Trump's actions already transforming America into a far better place than that to which Barack Obama and his three immediate predecessors had reduced it; but they don't yet know (any more than you do, Paul) what those actions will mean for the world. You can speculate, but that is only speculation. So please refrain from accusing conservatives of being short sighted; consider, rather, the possible beam in your own eye.

The contrast between these over-

heated, and I would even say intemperate, judgments on Trump's likely consequences, and Abbott's much more nuanced, yet realistic, views could hardly have been greater. So it was good to discern a notable change of tone in your next article, which focused on Trump (leaving us conservatives alone). Space permits me only to single out the advice for Australia you received from Robert Zoellick: 'Where you can, stay under the radar screen on issues that might provoke controversy' in the Trump camp. How does that good advice square with the pointed public criticisms leveled at Trump personally by Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop on his Paris Accord withdrawal, his decision to abandon Obama's appalling Iran 'deal', and his keeping his campaign promise to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem?

Having been encouraged by that second article's seemingly more moderate tone, I was astonished by its July 18 successor. If your earlier views seemed over-heated, even intemperate, how are those poured forth in this latter piece to be described – angry, even verging on the hysterical? Admittedly, this article was written immediately after Trump's disastrous Helsinki press conference with Vladimir Putin, where he uttered opinions from which he has since spent much energy rowing back. But even so, how could a single bungled press conference justify your saying, 'On the evidence it is tempting to conclude Trump's obsession with Putin constitutes a betrayal of his own country'? Evidence? Consider this real evidence of Trump's attitude to Russia: an unprecedented level of anti-Russian US sanctions; providing advanced weaponry to Ukraine to aid it against Russian 'volunteer' invaders; expelling 60 Russian diplomats after the Skripal poisoning; 'bullying' NATO members to lift their (anti-Russian) defence spending; 'bullying' Germany not to buy more Russian gas. And one badly flawed press conference outweighs all that? Really! I could say much more, but will only send my personal good wishes. John.