

Sense and nonsense in Trump's Mexican stand-off

Greg Sheridan, Foreign Editor, 12:00AM January 10, 2019

Donald Trump gave a frankly weird speech, his first prime-time television address to the nation as President, about illegal immigration and the need for a wall along the US's southern border with Mexico.

The background is that Trump wants more than \$US5 billion (\$7bn) to build his wall. The Democrats won't give it to him. He won't sign any spending legislation until they do, so there is a partial government shutdown, with many non-essential services closed and some essential employees working without pay.

The US has these shutdowns every so often and the employees always receive back pay. The newly minted House of Representatives Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and the Democrats' Senate leader, Chuck Schumer, responded with two of the feeblest, lowest-wattage speeches any audience not seeking a Valium replacement therapy has ever endured.

Probably, political advantage now rests marginally with Democrats, but this is changeable. Trump talked about illegal immigration. Pelosi and Schumer talked about the government shutdown. About 800,000 government employees are affected and this week they start to miss payment for full pay periods.

Trump needed to convince more voters that it was necessary to shut down the government. But he spoke only for eight minutes. He didn't say anything new. And, as always with a written speech, he was wooden. The speechwriters' attempted grandiloquence — "a crisis of the heart and a crisis of the soul" — sounded like a man learning, and messing up, a new dialect.

Yet, as ever with Trump, part of the difficulty in assessing it is that much of what he said was true and indeed common sense, but this was mixed in with all the weird stuff. What was true and common sense? Well, the US certainly does have a significant problem with illegal immigration. Official estimates put its illegal population at about 11 million, but there are academic studies that suggest it could be double. No one really knows.

A particular new wrinkle is that if illegal immigrants turn up with children, especially with women and children, and gain access to the US, they will not be quickly returned to their country of origin, or to Mexico, from where they entered. Instead, the long process of determining their claims for asylum will

grind on. Most of these claims fail, but by the time they are decided years later claimants have vanished into the vast US population of 330 million.

The US has every right to build a wall on its border. Every nation has the right to secure its borders. There is nothing morally reprehensible about a wall. It simply allows the US to enforce its borders. All up, counting legal immigrants and illegals, about 15 per cent of the US population was born overseas. Most Americans support legal immigration. Almost all of them oppose illegal immigration. One unusual feature of Trump's speech was that he spoke glowingly of legal immigrants. He does this occasionally but rarely.

This is because he tends to keep his political messaging so simple that the obvious and basic contradiction between legal immigration, which can and should contain a refugee and humanitarian element, and illegal immigration is one that he seldom makes rhetorically.

In any event the Democrats responded to Trump with maximum hypocrisy. Pelosi, Schumer, Hillary Clinton and almost all the other leading Democrats present Trump's wall as something uniquely shocking and offensive to American values. Yet it was Barack Obama who built hundreds of kilometres of fencing and, in part, walls on the Mexican border, and who deported record numbers of illegal immigrants.

Obama once declared: "Those who are in this country illegally and those who employ them are disrespecting the law." Nor was Trump the first president to make a potential connection between illegal immigration and terrorism. Obama also once said: "In this age of terror we cannot allow people to flood in at the southern border."

Clinton once boasted: "I voted numerous times as a senator to build a barrier." Pelosi and Schumer made similar statements way back.

It is legitimate for Clinton, Schumer, Pelosi and other Democrats to argue that Trump is proposing a bigger wall than that which they previously supported, or that they have changed their minds. What is not legitimate is to claim that Trump's proposed wall — refashioned rhetorically now into a barrier, and to be made of steel rather than concrete — is a unique crime against the very essence of humanity and decency.

And the wall or barrier or fence that Trump wants to build would certainly help control illegal immigration. So, as ever, there is a good deal of plain common sense in the Trump proposal and it is also what he promised on the election trail.

However, so much of what Trump says about this issue is just plain wrong, weirdly disconnected or, frequently, self-contradictory, and his own political opportunism is as naked as that of the Democrats, that it is not surprising he galvanises both his base and the base of his opponents.

Trump and his administration have talked about “thousands of terrorists” coming in over the southern border. Trump is right to want to secure the border but there is no evidence that any significant number of terrorists has ever come across the southern border.

Overall, Hispanic migration has been a fabulous positive influence in the US. After all these many years of immigration, legal and illegal, the US unemployment rate is now 3.7 per cent. Illegal immigrants do, however, suppress the wages of low-skilled workers, and that is a real problem.

Hispanics don't develop into terrorists. On the whole they love the US. My evidence for this bold assertion? Hispanics enlist in the US armed forces, demonstrating their willingness to fight and die for the US, at higher rates than the general US population.

Similarly, illegal drugs don't come to the US systematically with illegal immigrants, as Trump implied, but mostly through smuggling operations at legal entry points, especially airports. And Trump's claim of a national emergency is contradicted by his lack of urgency on the issue over the past two years, when Republicans controlled both houses of congress.

In the next few days Trump will either escalate, by declaring a national emergency and using extraordinary powers — which would be ridiculous but might be effective politically — or capitulate, with some minimal face-saving compromise. In the meantime he has again succeeded in being the trapeze artist from whom no one can avert their eyes.