

During the federal election campaign the University of Canberra's focus group in the seat of Indi was asked who'd be the better prime minister to deal with a possible Trump presidency. Most thought Malcolm Turnbull, and a significant factor in his favour was his business experience.

On Thursday Turnbull cashed in this chip in his 15-minute call to the President-elect. He is also drawing hope from this aspect of Trump's background.

"I suppose as both being businessmen who found our way into politics somewhat later in life, we come to the problems of our own nations and indeed world problems, with a pragmatic approach," Turnbull said later.

"Mr Trump is a deal-maker. He is a businessman, he is a deal-maker and he will - I have no doubt - view the world in a very practical and pragmatic way."

But the truth is the Australian government - like the rest of the world – doesn't really have a clue how Trump will behave in office.

"The thing that stands out is how little we know about what his politico-strategic approach to the world and global issues will be," says a senior official. The assumption is he won't implement all he's said, but the question is where the line will be drawn between rhetoric and substance.

Turnbull is taking the approach – sound enough - of trying to get in early with the President-elect, while reassuring Australians the alliance with the United States remains safe. "It could not have been a warmer discussion," Turnbull said, "and he looked forward, as I did, to an early meeting".

The bilateral relationship is not the potential problem. Apart from the importance of Trump's global stances, Australia's preoccupations are with the Trump administration's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, and its position on trade. The isolationist and protectionist lines Trump has run are deep concerns.

The risks for Australia would lie in the fallout from Trump's relations with other countries of importance to us – if he launched a trade war with China; if he forced Japan and South Korea to be more self-reliant in their defence.

Turnbull said he stressed the importance of maintaining a strong US regional commitment; Trump “described to me his commitment to increasing America's defence capabilities and, in particular, his commitment to expanding the United States navy – of such enormous significance in our region”.

The two also canvassed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump rejects but Turnbull has been pushing – greatly against the odds – in the hope of it being passed in Barack Obama's lame duck period. The chances are minimal.

How much influence Australia and other countries will be able to have on the way Trump approaches the region is impossible to predict. Many factors will be involved, including who gets the key jobs of secretary of state and secretary of defense.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop did preparatory work about a possible Trump administration, unlikely as it seemed. It's more difficult between now and the January inauguration, because transition teams do not have open doors to foreigners.

Meanwhile the government unfortunately can't resist some domestic politicking around Trump. Bishop's attack on Bill Shorten's past comments on Trump - when he described him as “barking mad” and “entirely unsuitable to be leader of the free world” – was poorly judged. Shorten went too far – he may be dealing with Trump after the next election. But Liberals made undiplomatic observations previously too; Christopher Pyne said the Trump phenomenon was making US democracy “look kind of weird” and Josh Frydenberg called him a “dropkick”.

In his Thursday address to parliament Shorten congratulated Trump while not resiling from having been critical. “The abiding friendship between our nations is strong enough for honesty. In fact, true friendship demands nothing less,” he said.

“When this parliament sees women being disrespected, we have an obligation to speak up. When this parliament sees people being discriminated against because of the colour of their skin or their religion, we have an obligation to speak up. The US alliance doesn’t mean trading away our shared values – it means standing up for them.”

Australian politicians are mulling on the factors that helped drive the Trump win and their implications for them.

The populist and isolationist Pauline Hanson had the champagne out – literally.

Turnbull reiterated that “it is vitally important ... in this time of rapid economic change, that the change is seen to be inclusive. That is to say, no sectors or communities or regions should be allowed to be left behind”.

One reason why Turnbull did poorly on July 2 is that he failed to show enough empathy to those who are being “left behind”, or are in danger of it. His language of “excitement” and “innovation” was more likely to anger than attract them.

It is not just a matter of getting the language right. Finding ways to help these regions and workers to “keep up” is extremely difficult, requiring nuanced policies. In some cases, it can be impossible given the scale of the economic transition. This may throw an extra burden onto the welfare system, however much the government would like it otherwise.

The strong Hanson vote at the election and the support for the Nick Xenophon Team reflected the same fodder of economic discontent and general alienation that Trumpism fed on. The risk for Turnbull is that this grows over the next couple of years.

There is something else too, that Labor frontbencher Joel Fitzgibbon touched on in his Thursday observation that “the idea of any government securing at least two terms may very well be a thing of the past”. With a volatile electorate the political wheel turns quickly.

Grattan on Friday: As one businessman to another...Malcolm and Donald begin to talk

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Bearing this in mind, there is a lesson for a prime minister. Decide what few big things you want to do, and concentrate on getting them done (to the extent the Senate permits). Neither spread yourself too thinly, nor assume there will be time later. You probably won't be there all that long.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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