

Turnbull news conference an exercise in avoidance and obfuscation

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

There were several takeouts from Malcolm Turnbull's rather odd Monday news conference, which followed his Sunday telephone conversation with Donald Trump.

First, Australians are still not to be given any detail about the agreement – forged under the Obama administration and now confirmed by Trump – that the US will take refugees from Nauru and Manus Island.

Second, Turnbull appears to want at all costs to avoid criticising the Trump crackdown on the entry of nationals from the seven nominated countries. This is despite widespread international criticism of the bar. Presumably Turnbull is substantially driven by fears that forthrightness might jeopardise the refugee deal.

Third, Turnbull could not or would not give an indication of what the suspension might mean for Australian dual citizens from these countries.

The press conference, held jointly with Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, saw Turnbull opening with very similar lines to those put out about the phone call by the government on Sunday on an unattributable basis. They had a “yesterday's story” feel about them.

Turnbull looked as though he was on the podium reluctantly – his head was often down, he seemed dejected.

His refusal to provide any further information in relation to the refugees the US is supposed to be taking off our hands is cynical and unacceptable. Turnbull has won favourable headlines in the wake of having Trump reconfirm the deal. But as we don't know the fine print – for starters, the rough number of people likely to be accepted, and when they could start to leave – we can't judge how much praise Turnbull deserves for either the deal or the confirmation.

This is media manipulation at its worst. There is no legitimate justification for that secrecy; Turnbull's suggestion that it's all a matter for the US sounds a fob off.

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When Turnbull was pressed to express an opinion about aspects of the Trump executive order, he simply slid around the issue.

It wasn't his job to run commentary on the domestic policies of other countries, he said. Australia's border arrangements were the envy of the world. "If others wish to emulate what we're doing, they're welcome to do so." Is he equating Trump's measures to Australia's? But then he added "Our rules, our laws, our values are very well known," including "our commitment to multiculturalism, our commitment to a nondiscriminatory immigration program. ... So that's where we stand."

As for the urgent matter of how Australian dual citizens might be affected by the executive order, Turnbull was unenlightening.

"If those issues arise in respect of Australian citizens we will, and we are, taking up that issue with the Administration. Can I just say to you, we have a very close relationship with the United States, and when we want to engage in discussions of this kind, we do so privately and frankly."

Yet Britain has already set out the position of its dual citizens.

A statement dated January 29 from the British Foreign Office said: "Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has today held conversations with the US government and as a result we can clarify that:

"The presidential executive order only applies to individuals travelling from one of the seven named countries.

"If you are travelling to the US from anywhere other than one of those countries (for instance, the UK) the executive order does not apply to you and you will experience no extra checks regardless of your nationality or your place of birth.

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"If you are a UK national who happens to be travelling from one of those countries to the US, then the order does not apply to you – even if you were born in one of those countries.

"If you are a dual citizen of one of those countries travelling to the US from OUTSIDE those countries then the order does not apply to you.

"The only dual nationals who might have extra checks are those coming from one of the seven countries themselves – for example a UK-Libya dual national coming from Libya to the US.

"The US has reaffirmed its strong commitment to the expeditious processing of all travellers from the United Kingdom."

It was left to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop to say later: "I have directed our officials in Washington DC to work with US officials to ensure any preferential treatment extended to any other country in relation to travel and entry to the United States is extended to Australia".

The work should have already been done and Australia should have had a statement out when the UK did.

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