

Turnbull's Trump riff won't please The Donald but it could be a hit at home

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



Malcolm Turnbull's Midwinter Ball speech parodying Donald Trump has received international attention. Lukas Coch/AAP

We can presume that even without the assistance of Nine's Laurie Oakes, Washington officialdom would have heard soon enough about Malcolm Turnbull's riff on Donald Trump at Wednesday's Midwinter Ball.

After all, among the hundreds of guests in Parliament's Great Hall was James Carouso, the US embassy's charge d'affaires. Any diplomat doing their job properly would inform their government about a speech mentioning their country's leader, regardless of it being "off the record".

But there's a world of difference between a discreet report filtered through the channels of bureaucrats and advisers (who may or may not tell the president) and a blaze of publicity in the media.

Trump is not known for humour when the joke's on him, and Turnbull's hilarious send-up is likely to go down poorly with him. Whether this matters remains to be seen.

It was a great speech; I'll leave readers to hunt for the now readily available detail, as I was present on the off-the-record occasion. It was Malcolm unplugged in a witty, clever way, self-deprecating even when he was sending up Trump.

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These ball nights see an informal contest between the prime minister of the day and the opposition leader as to who can perform best. The chatter among guests was that Turnbull's speech clearly beat that of Bill Shorten.

But, as things turned out, it was a risk-laden exercise.

The leaders prepare their speeches for this night, especially because they have to strike a humorous tone and being seriously funny – as distinct from inserting the odd joke – is not their usual stock in trade.

So it is surprising that someone around Turnbull, if not Turnbull himself, didn't hear a warning bell.

It is not for lack of precedent. There was that most spectacular "leak" from the press gallery's 1990 dinner when treasurer Paul Keating's "Placedo Domingo" speech, seen as an attack on prime minister Bob Hawke, which caused a crisis between the two.

This week's incident has sparked questions and debate about journalists' ethics and practices.

Should Oakes have put the speech to air? In my opinion, he had absolutely every right to do so – he wasn't there and so had not consented to the "off-the-record" terms.

Is the leaker, whoever it was, to be condemned? Whether you think they should be, leaks happen. We journalists encourage them, so we shouldn't be hypocritical about this one.

We should, incidentally, respond with a horse laugh to the attempt by Mathias Cormann to suggest the leak might be Shorten's fault. That was quickly denied by Oakes.

Should the ball be off the record anyway? Surely this is an absurdity, given the number of people present, including lobbyists, business figures, politicians, staffers and diplomats, as well as journalists.

Obviously leaders would be blander if they were talking on the record. This is not a credible reason, however, for drawing a curtain over what is effectively a public dinner. It simply looks like excessively “insider” behaviour between media and politicians.

But the debate about ethics is less important at the moment than the consideration of possible consequences of Turnbull's speech.

The latest incident comes against the background of the up-and-down start to the Turnbull-Trump relationship.

There was the fraught phone call early this year in which Trump denounced the deal the Obama administration did for the US to take some refugees from Manus Island and Nauru. At the other extreme came the over-the-top love-in during their press conference in New York when Turnbull, to his discredit, agreed with Trump that the account of the phone call had been fake news.

The government is pushing the point that Turnbull's Trump references were all just a bit of fun, showing another side of him. The speech was “affectionately light-hearted”, Turnbull has said.

The US embassy played down the affair, saying “we take this with the good humour that was intended”, as did Australia's ambassador in Washington, Joe Hockey, who quipped: “The administration hasn't rung us up and I haven't been hauled into the White House and sent back to Australia so far as I'm aware.”

But in view of the background and Trump's prickly nature, the government will be holding its breath.

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Trump might have so much on his plate that he doesn't give Turnbull a second thought.

But if he got hissy, what is the worst he could do? The only immediate serious thing one can think of would be to go even more slowly on the refugee deal, already proceeding at a snail's pace. That indeed would be a high price to pay for a joke or three.

He could be more difficult in future interactions with Turnbull. After Kevin Rudd leaked his disparaging remarks about George W Bush following a phone conversation the two had about the G20, their relationship became particularly frosty.

But the affair should be kept in perspective. Sometimes the Australian and US leaders of the day are joined at the hip – Lyndon Johnson and Harold Holt, John Howard and Bush. Historically, that can be seen as a good or a bad thing. Sometimes relations are tense – Gough Whitlam and Richard Nixon, Rudd and Bush after the G20 affair.

But as is often pointed out, the Australian-American relationship is based on shared interests. Thus Australia failing to forewarn the Americans that it was leasing the Port of Darwin to the Chinese was a much more serious offence than a bit of close-to-the-bone humour.

And, as a story in the Washington Post that reported Turnbull's speech illustrated, when it comes to Trump Turnbull isn't on his lonesome. It noted Trump has become "the butt of jokes in capitals around the world".

"Fellow world leaders appear emboldened to poke fun at him as a way to bolster their political standing," the story said. Now that would be an upside for Turnbull.

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