

In diplomatic-speak, the word “regrettable” is close to the mildest rebuke that can be offered by one country in response to another’s actions.

Thus, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s [expression of “regret”](#) over a decision by the government of Nauru to refuse a visa to an ABC journalist for a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in September represents a mild response to an unfortunate decision.

You can be sure that Turnbull’s advisers will have laboured over the best choice of words to describe Australia’s response to Nauru’s challenge to a core Australian value, namely press freedom.

These advisers will have wavered between “disappointment” and “regret”. They settled on the milder form of words. This is the diplomatic equivalent of sorrow rather than anger - or even disappointment.

Australia’s meek response

The question then arises: why the extreme sensitivity over Nauru’s provocative decision to prevent a representative of the national broadcaster from covering a multinational event that draws representatives from 18 Pacific island countries?

The simple answer is that Australia finds itself beholden to one of the smallest and most impoverished island states in the world, whose economy would collapse without Australian subventions.

Australia’s vexed asylum seeker policy – not to mention the political fortunes of the government itself - is hostage to an asylum-seeker detention centre on Nauru.

[Nauru’s aid allocation](#) of AU\$25.9 million in 2018-19, represents one-third of its gross domestic product. But, more than that, it receives tens of millions annually to house the centre.

This is the baleful detail that constrains an Australian government from calling out representatives of a mendicant state on an issue that should not even be subject for debate.

Read more: [Australia has an obligation to support the rule of law in Nauru](#)

Leaving aside Canberra's diffidence as the metropolitan power in the Pacific to assert itself among its island neighbours, its response to the Nauru provocation is weak.

Labor, in its current state of supporting the government's refugee policy more or less in its entirety, would not be much different, although shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong did express "disappointment" in Nauru's decision, rather than "regret".

Lurking in the background – or in surrounding waters – is another issue that is constraining Australia's response to the Nauru affront. This is the heightened concern about China's rippling drive into the Pacific.

Canberra is pushing back against Beijing's attempts to curry favour with Pacific island states on security grounds. It's become a major preoccupation of Australian foreign policy, and one that is leading to expenditures of hundreds of millions of dollars to forestall expanding Chinese influence.

[The allocation of AU\\$136 million for an undersea internet cable](#) between the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Australia is one example.

Critical coverage of Nauru

A further question in all of this: why has the Nauruan leadership taken such exception to the ABC?

Australia's government failed to stand up for press freedom after Nauru barred ABC journalist

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

The explanation is relatively straightforward and has much less to do with the national broadcaster's critical coverage of asylum seeker matters than it does with alleged corruption by leading Nauruans.

Backed by [leaked emails](#), the ABC reported extensively in 2015 on allegedly illicit payments to prominent figures in the Nauruan government by an Australian company involved in the phosphate trade.

Both the company and Nauruan officials, including President Baron Waqa, have denied the allegations. But the issue continues to cast a pall over Australia-Nauru relations.

Read more: [**Amnesty-Human Rights Watch investigation reports medical neglect and assaults on Nauru**](#)

Nauru's persistent refusal to grant visas to journalists without payment of an [AU\\$8,000 non-refundable visa fee](#) is another example of the strains that have arisen over media coverage of the country.

[In a statement posted online](#) explaining the reasons why it blocked ABC from the Pacific Islands Forum, Nauru said this:

It should be noted that no representative from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation will be granted a visa to enter Nauru under any circumstances, due to this organisation's blatant interference in Nauru's domestic politics prior to the 2016 election, harassment of and lack of respect towards our president in Australia, false and defamatory allegations against members of our government, and continued biased and false reporting about our country.

In response, the ABC has asserted its right to “independent reporting on our region”.

[In its Nauru “country brief”](#), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade describes the island as “one of the world’s smallest independent states.” Its phosphate reserves, on which it has depended, contribute “only a modest and intermittent revenue stream”.

Successive Nauruan administrations have squandered this birthright through corruption and poor investments.

In other words, without Australian government assistance, Nauru would go under unless help was forthcoming from other sources, including Beijing.

Pressed this week on his response to Nauru’s refusal to allow the ABC to cover the Pacific Islands Forum, [Turnbull said this](#) :

The one thing I won’t be doing is engaging in megaphone diplomacy.

Rather than engaging in “megaphone diplomacy”, the prime minister’s voice could barely be heard above a whisper.

Tony Walker 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 their academic appointment.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/australias-government-failed-to-stand-up-for-press-free>

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