

The dramatic revelation [by the New York Times](#) that Donald Trump pressed Scott Morrison in an early September phone call for help in an exercise of overt presidential politicking does not indicate any Australian government wrongdoing.

But it shows how Morrison's bromance with the president brings its political embarrassments along with all that glitz and warmth.

[Last week](#) the PM got himself caught up in a Trump-created political rally. Now he's on the spot over this (typical) Trump call, which was about US Attorney-General William Barr's seeking information for the justice department inquiry that the president hopes will discredit the Mueller probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Australia, inadvertently, was central in the train of events leading to the Mueller inquiry, which has now reported (and found Russian activity).

In May 2016, Alexander Downer, then Australian High Commissioner in London, had drinks with Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos.

Papadopoulos said Russia had told the Trump campaign it had damaging information on Hillary Clinton and was prepared to release it close to the election.

Downer reported that back to the foreign affairs department, which shared it with the intelligence community. Subsequently, the Americans were alerted to it, and it got to the FBI, becoming a catalyst for the Mueller inquiry.

Downer acted properly. A diplomat's job is to gather information and inform their government.

(Papadopoulos, who sees Downer as an agent of entrapment, has tweeted in the wake of the

NYT article: “I have been right about Downer from the beginning. A wannabe spy and Clinton errand boy who is about to get exposed on the world stage”.)

The issue for the Australian government became more complicated when Trump, who paints himself as the victim of a conspiracy, launched the current investigation into the origins of the FBI’s inquiry. The president said at the time he hoped Barr “looks at the UK, and I hope he looks at Australia, and I hope he looks at Ukraine. I hope he looks at everything because there was a hoax that was perpetrated on our country”.

Australia immediately promised cooperation.

Did it have much alternative? On the downside, this was a highly charged Trumpian exercise. But the inquiry was under the auspices of a US government department. And wouldn’t refusal to co-operate suggest Australia had something to hide, when there is no reason to suppose it did?

Joe Hockey, Australia’s ambassador in Washington, wrote to Barr on May 28 saying: “The Australian government will use its best endeavours to support your efforts in this matter”. He said while Downer was no longer employed by the government, “we stand ready to provide you with all relevant information to support your inquiries.”

Presumably, the government has little to give beyond an account of the Downer discussion and the subsequently passing on of the contents of that conversation.

But Simon Jackman, CEO of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, poses the pertinent question: “If Hockey says, we’re here to help, what was the point of the September phone call?” He suggest it might have had to do with the declassification of documents.

The affair is now politically messy for Morrison on two levels.

The leak of the previously undisclosed telephone call comes immediately after the revelations about the president's call to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, in which he urged him to investigate Democrat presidential hopeful Joe Biden and his son. That has led to the impeachment inquiry.

There is no parallel between the conversations, but inevitably there will be a conflation.

Further, in the absence of a transcript, there will be questions (already being asked by the opposition) about the content and tone of the Trump-Morrison conversation, which came shortly before the PM's US trip, on which he was so effusive about the president. Bill Shorten said: "Mr Morrison needs to clean up the perception that perhaps the special reception was returned for special favours done".

It's understood that Morrison and Trump didn't discuss the specifics of the matter. The request was reportedly "polite", asking for cooperation with Barr and for a point of contact. Trump was aware that the matter was before Morrison's time, and didn't expect him to know about the details.

The government insists it has nothing to fear if the transcript of the call becomes public through another leak. If that's accurate, it should be hoping that leak will occur.

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

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