

Scott Morrison warns against 'negative globalism'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has foreshadowed his government will have Australia play a more active role in seeking to set global standards.

Delivering the Lowy Lecture on Thursday night, Morrison said Australia “cannot afford to leave it to others to set the standards that will shape our global economy”.

He has asked the foreign affairs department for an audit of global institutions and rule-making processes where Australia had the greatest stake, and he plans to tap Australian expertise in expanding its role.

Morrison’s initiative, which follows his recent United States trip and his criticisms during it of China’s behaviour on trade, has particularly in mind the World Trade Organisation which is seen to need reform.

In comments that seemed to have an eye to Brexit and Donald Trump’s recent lauding of patriotism over globalism, Morrison made a sharp distinction between positive and negative globalism.

He said that “Australia does and must always seek to have a responsible and participative international agency in addressing global issues.” This he dubbed this “practical globalism”.

Australia was not served by isolationism and protectionism, he said. “But it also does not serve our national interests when international institutions demand conformity rather than independent cooperation on global issues.

"The world works best when the character and distinctiveness of independent nations is preserved within a framework of mutual respect. This includes respecting electoral mandates of their constituencies.

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"We should avoid any reflex towards a negative globalism that coercively seeks to impose a mandate from an often ill defined borderless global community. And worse still, an unaccountable internationalist bureaucracy. Globalism must facilitate, align and engage, rather than direct and centralise. As such an approach can corrode support for joint international action.

"Only a national government, especially one accountable through the ballot box and the rule of law, can define its national interests," he said. "And under my leadership Australia's international engagement will be squarely driven by Australia's national interests.

"To paraphrase former prime minister John Howard, as Australians, 'we will decide our interests and the circumstances in which we seek to pursue them.'

"This will not only include our international efforts to support global peace and stability and to promote open markets based on fair and transparent rules, but also other global standards that underpin commerce, investment and exchange."

The Prime Minister sought to put a positive spin on his labelling of China as a "newly developed" economy during his foreign policy speech in the US last week - a description which the Chinese contest.

"China has in many ways changed the world, so we would expect the terms of its engagement to change too. That's why when we look at negotiating rules of the future of the global economy, for example, we would expect China's obligations to reflect its greater power status.

"This is a compliment, not a criticism.

"And that is what I mean when describing China as a newly developed economy.

"The rules and institutions that support global cooperation must reflect the modern world. It can't

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be set and forget,” he said.

Morrison told his audience that his passions had always been for domestic politics – he did not naturally seek out international platforms. But as prime minister he had to be directed by Australia’s national interest.

He said he would be visiting India in January and also Japan early next year. This follows a busy international schedule in 2019.

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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