

Morrison should tread lightly overseas

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There is a convention in the United States that politics ends at the water's edge. It requires at a minimum that when American politicians are abroad, they refrain from playing partisan politics.

The phrase was coined in 1952 by Republican Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg from Michigan, a stalwart of the US Senate with a verbose manner and a magnificent combover.

At the start of the Cold War, Vandenberg called for 'a mutual effort, under our indispensable two-party system, to unite our official voice at the water's edge so that America speaks with maximum authority... It does not involve the remotest surrender of free debate in determining our position. On the contrary, frank co-operation and free debate are indispensable to ultimate unity. In a word, it simply seeks national security ahead of partisan advantage. Every foreign policy must be totally debated... and the "loyal opposition" is under special obligation to see that this occurs.'

For the most part, the principle still holds. If it is breached, the culprit is chastised.

When the former Republican House Speaker, Newt Gingrich, went to Israel in 1998 and criticised President Bill Clinton's Middle East policies, he was slapped down by former Republican President Gerald Ford for transgressing Vandenberg's convention.

When the former Democratic House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, visited Damascus in 2007, at a time when President George W. Bush refused to talk to the Assad regime, she was roundly condemned by conservatives. John Boehner, then the Republican leader in the House, said that Pelosi was in Syria "for one reason, and that is to embarrass the president."

The rationale for the convention is that engaging in politics abroad is likely to harm the national interest, which all politicians are sworn to serve. It can diminish your country in the eyes of others, or entangle it in bilateral disputation.

Opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison should think about this convention as he departs for Malaysia today.

Australia's external policies, including foreign and immigration policy, should be subject to the most robust political debate. It is entirely legitimate, too, for opposition politicians to state their beliefs openly and clearly when they are traveling overseas. But to go abroad wilfully blind to the mischief you may cause in Australia's external relations is something else.

Mr Morrison claims that he is going on a fact-finding trip to assess the treatment of asylum seekers, but in fact he has already stated his opinion of that treatment. Obviously he is not travelling on a human rights mission. He is going to Malaysia to embarrass the Australian government. The cavalcade of cameras and reporters accompanying him will ensure his criticisms get maximum coverage, in Malaysia as well as Australia.

The trip risks causing disgruntlement on the part of Malaysian politicians that their country is being drawn into Australian politics, and offence on the part of Malaysian media that their country is being criticised by visiting foreigners.

Malaysia is an important country to Australia and an influential player in Southeast Asia. Our interests intersect on many issues, including as members of the Five Power Defence Arrangements. In the past, however, our bilateral relations have been marked by troubles as much as tranquillity. Could Mr Morrison not make his points in a press conference in Canberra instead of Kuala Lumpur?

He is also an unlikely person to make such a trip. In February this year, Liberal sources claimed that Mr Morrison had proposed to the Shadow Cabinet that the Opposition should run an "anti-Muslim"

political strategy based on Muslims' supposed inability to integrate into Australian society. Such a strategy, had it been adopted, would have had ugly ramifications for our domestic harmony.

Now Mr Morrison proposes to criticise Malaysia, a majority-Muslim country, in Malaysia, for its failure to integrate newcomers to Malaysian society.

In the lead-up to the Second World War, Arthur Vandenberg was a vocal isolationist. His politicking made life extremely difficult for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his management of US foreign policy and his support for the democracies fighting the dictators. Perhaps Vandenberg learned his lesson; his convention that politics should end at the water's edge can be seen as an effort at atonement.

Let's hope that Scott Morrison similarly learns a lesson from his past, and conducts himself in Malaysia with an eye to the national interest as well as his own political party's domestic advancement.

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