

RUNNING THE FOREIGN POLICY GAUNTLET

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Polling reveals the constraints on political leaders over international relations

THIS morning Julia Gillard will make her first major address on foreign policy as leader. Her predecessor's sudden demise has been linked, at least in part, to his handling of the introduction of an emissions trading scheme. But climate change is not the only international issue where the electorate is sending complex, competing messages to political leaders. Opinion polling suggests Australia's new Prime Minister will need to walk the gauntlet of public opinion on issues as diverse as Japanese whaling to Chinese investment.

Climate change has become the black death of Australian politics, having killed off a handful of leaders from both sides of politics.

A look at the polling shows why. According to the latest Lowy Poll, almost three-quarters of Australians want action to reduce our carbon emissions even before a global agreement is reached. But, as with most things, problems arise when it comes to who pays. Asked how much extra they would be willing to pay on their electricity bill to help solve climate change, a third of Australians didn't want to pay anything at all, while a quarter said \$10 a month extra or less.

Looking at it from another perspective, while the proportion of Australians saying tackling climate change is a very important foreign policy goal has fallen over the past few years, more than half the voting population still thinks it is a very important objective.

With these competing demands - fix it but don't charge me for it - there is no easy solution. Yet even with Tony Abbott's opposition to an ETS, it will be hard to sustain Kevin Rudd's line of inaction until at least 2013 without frustrating a lot of voters. It would seem Gillard either needs to be more persuasive in making the case for a deferral of the ETS or else revise the idea of a carbon reduction scheme that, at least initially, has only modest implications for households.

Climate change policy might be extremely difficult, but the three big bilateral relationships with the US, China and Japan also pose major challenges.

When it comes to the US, the priority will be to maintain strong ties, especially when a whopping 86 per cent of Australians say the alliance is very or fairly important for our security.

Saying the right things and driving closer relations should be relatively straightforward. One difficulty, though, could come over the war in Afghanistan. Since the Lowy Institute began asking people about the war back in 2007, there has never been a majority in favour of it. This year a majority of 54 per cent opposed our continuing military involvement while just 43 per cent were in favour of it, and that was before the string of recent Australian casualties.

With the Coalition also supporting the war, it will be easier to maintain our contribution, but if casualties continue to rise and there are signs the US is less certain of its eventual success, it will be difficult to resist mounting popular opposition to the war and to manage our alliance commitments.

On China, Gillard faces an even tougher balancing act. Polling shows a large majority of Australians believe China's growth has been good for Australia. But they are worried

about the future. Almost half say it is likely that our single largest trading partner will also become a military threat to us in the next 20 years and 57 per cent say the government is allowing too much Chinese investment.

This ambivalence towards China's rise suggests the need to put the relationship on a firmer, more stable, footing, where Australian policy and core national interests are clearly articulated and understood in Beijing.

When it comes to Japan - our second-largest export destination - the Prime Minister faces another conundrum. On the one hand, Australians have warm feelings towards Japan and high levels of trust in it. On the other hand, they are among the world's most vocal anti-whalers and are baying for action against Japan.

In the Lowy Institute's 2008 poll, 58 per cent of Australians said the Australian government should do more to pressure Japan to stop all whaling even if we risked losing valuable trade deals. The government has responded to this pressure with actions such as taking Japan to the International Court of Justice. This has threatened relations with a key ally while simultaneously hardening Japanese views on whaling.

The tension in the current policy approach towards Japan needs some attention. And in this case, responding to anti-whaling sentiment by ratcheting up rhetoric against Japan will not serve our national interest. Instead, there is a need to create more realistic expectations about what Australia's efforts to end whaling can achieve.

Finally, on the UN Security Council bid, which was one of the main priorities of Gillard's predecessor, polling provides two views. In last year's Lowy Poll, 71 per cent of Australians agreed that Australia should seek a seat on the council. However, this year, only a third of Australians saw it as a very important foreign policy goal.

Foreign policy is often designated as a bipartisan issue - as if it were somehow straightforward and obvious. But on many big issues there are difficult decisions to be made and competing popular pressures to confront. When she sets out her vision for Australia in the world, Gillard might be interested in one final poll finding: 69 per cent of Australians say the government pays too little attention to their views when it comes to making foreign policy.

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