

Professor James Curran

Australia in a Trumpian World



In introducing Professor Curran, Geoff McWilliam commented that our speaker was both a Professor of Modern History and a passionate rugby fan, with a book on David Campese published in 2022.

Professor Curran commented initially that responding to the quick-fire actions and announcements of the current Trump administration reminded him of an earlier experience in cricket nets dealing with a wayward cricket ball machine firing balls at him rapidly and erratically!

Speaking on what he saw as the fundamentals, Professor Curran noted that Trump's lodestar is contempt for the old order. This is reflected in his cutting a swathe through the rules-based order established after WW2, including the multilateral trading system. His language reflects his wanting America to get its own way in the world, and his view that "might is right." He has little time for the liberal international order and his focus is on the western hemisphere.

In recent weeks with the changes to tariff levels he is looking a little "ratty", including with emergence of the expression TACO – Trump Always Chickens Out. However, his Cabinet is performing and any adverse trends in the economy have not yet emerged. The polls indicate that he is not in bad shape politically. In geopolitical terms the Administration has intensified its language on what is expected of other countries, particularly on defence spending. The Europeans probably needed the "cattle prod" in terms of providing for more their own self-defence. They have undertaken to support Ukraine even if America was to pull back. But for how long?

At the weekend Asian countries were told by US Defence Secretary Hegseth that America expected them to increase their spending on defence to 5% of GDP; the figure for Australia was 3.5%. There has been quite a lot of pushback including from Australia with the PM indicating our defence spending would increase to 2.33% by 2032. There needs to be more discussion with the electorate about our defence needs given the strategic environment, though the "threat" is rarely pronounced with any clarity by policymakers. There is also uncertainty regarding receipt of the Virginia Class submarines given the US's own demand and its limited production capability (1.3 per year when it needs to lift to 2.4). In addition, our own resources will be severely stretched by the need to upgrade our Collins Class submarines and to design and build SSN AUKUS. All in all, a huge demand on our defence industry capability!

Turning to US Defence Secretary Hegseth's speech at the weekend, Professor Curran commented specifically on the point being made that Australia and many other countries who have a major trading relationship with China and a security relationship with the US are going to "complicate things" in a time of crisis (like a war over Taiwan). Given the difficulty of the choice that would need to be made, we need to do everything in our power to avoid the conflict arising in the first place. Hegseth has little stature or authority.

Secretary Hegseth's remarks regarding the trade/security dilemma are consistent with views that have been expressed in Washington in past years, including expressions of concern about Australia's trade dependence on China. Our PM and Trade Minister have pushed back hard, but there is no point in demonising Trump or mockery. The situation requires extraordinary diplomatic guile. Post Trump things are unlikely to go back to past norms. In dealing with the trade/security dilemma "unstitching the Aust-US Alliance" would have significant consequences for Australia including but not limited to significantly increased defence spending. What are Australia's other alternatives? Armed neutrality? Closer relations with other countries? Finding a new great and powerful friend? But who?

On the issues that Trump's ascension has raised, including about the reliability of the US as a partner and Australia's alternatives, we need to apply much more deep thought and avoid group think.

Other points that arose during Question time included:

- Higher tariffs are not the answer to fixing the US national debt (currently US\$36 trillion).
- PM Albanese has been more robust in his comments since the election and the US will have concluded that he is not to be kicked around, particularly given the importance of Australia as the host of US Defence facilities such as Pine Gap.
- In the event defence spending is to be increased, the Australian Government will need to start a conversation with the population about the need and how to finance it. (Professor Curran earlier commented that the NDIS would be a good place to start).
- We should be doing a lot more to strengthen our relations with Indonesia.
- Things could get messy for Trump if by the mid-terms his rusted on supporters find there has been no benefit for them.

In thanking Professor Curran on behalf of the members, Richard Broinowski highlighted the need for Australia to develop closer relations with our Asian neighbours.

Alan Locke