

Colourful slogans are not a guide to international affairs



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When a Prime Minister is in trouble, their efforts at the international level – no matter how successful – will not help them. Just ask John Howard. He staged a highly successful meeting of APEC leaders in Sydney in September 2007. It was the biggest diplomatic event ever held in Australia and attended by the presidents of the US, China and Russia. He organised it down to the Driza-Bone outfits given to each leader. Two months later he was voted out of office and lost his seat.

Last week Julia Gillard was warmly received in Washington with lots of

standing ovations for her speech to the Congress and a friendly reception by the President, Barack Obama. It will not help her in Australia where her approval rate is plummeting and Labor is recording its lowest primary vote ever in the national polls. Gillard's problem is credibility. She has announced she will do exactly what she promised she would not and introduce a tax on carbon dioxide.

But then the Gillard speech to Congress was not about impressing folks back home. It was about endearing herself to the American audience. And she did this well.

Americans are very polite and friendly people. They habitually give political leaders long standing ovations. They treat leaders – theirs and others' – with a respect that Australians do not. In our Parliament it was traditionally frowned upon even to clap. Our parliamentary culture is more restrained than the effusive US political culture. When George Bush addressed a joint sitting in the House of Representatives the

audience listened in respectful silence. He seemed a little flat; then the Greens Leader, Bob Brown, began some undergraduate heckling and Bush sprang to life. A speaker often needs an audience to get them going.

A lot of international relations consist of flattery. A diplomatic exchange habitually begins with each side telling the other how wonderful

you" – were accused, by left-wing critics, of grovelling. Gillard was more fawning than they were. If it had been a Liberal, the press gallery would have made a meal of it. What troubled me was whether Gillard really believed what she was saying.

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they are at something. But I suspect that Gillard's finale to the Congress, with a tear and a quiver – "You can do anything" – would be viewed by most Australians as over the top. Perhaps she felt that as a one-time member of the anti-American Socialist Forum she had to overcompensate.

For years prime ministers Holt – "All the way with LBJ" – and Gorton – "We'll come a waltzing matilda with

down in a war in Vietnam that eventually it realised it could not win. A lot of Americans learnt from that experience that there are limits to US power and one of the things it cannot do is impose democracy in a country where there is a well-organised enemy.

There are so many things America can do. It leads the world in science and technology. It has the best institutions of higher learning and research.

It is hugely innovative and dominates the invention of consumer goods, the internet, arts and music. But it cannot balance its budget. It cannot introduce a system of financial regulation as good as Australia's.

America has the greatest military in the world but there are financial limits that constrain it. Public opinion limits how and when to deploy it. It is well to remember there are limits to power when engaging in international relations – no doubt the reason the Obama administration is loath to put troops into Libya. The feminist anthem "I am strong, I can do anything" is a colourful slogan. It is not a recipe on how to act in international affairs.

It is because it can't do everything that the US needs allies. Australia is an important ally in Afghanistan. It was an important ally in Iraq. And allies can speak frankly to each other. The truth is generally much more complicated than a slogan.

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