The normally placid waters of Australian political life had a rude awakening in the past week. The French president Emanuel Macron was interviewed by a group of Australian reporters. He was asked if he thought he had been lied to by Scott Morrison, the Australian Prime Minister, on the issue of the cancellation of the Australian order for French built submarines. In a reply that has been extensively rebroadcast almost every day since, Macron replied, No, he did not think he was lied to, he knew.

The issue arose for a number of reasons. Australia had recently announced that it was cancelling the $90 billion order for French built conventional submarines. Instead, it was going to order nuclear powered submarines to be built either by the British or the Americans. Australia currently has no capacity at all to build nuclear powered submarines.

The question to Macron arose because it was an issue in Australia as to whether the French were informed of the change of Australian heart about buying French built submarines. Macron had held talks within recent weeks with Australian defence and foreign ministers as well as with Scott Morrison, the Australian prime minister. It is certain that neither Marise Payne, the Australian foreign minister, nor Peter Dutton the defence minister, had raised the possible cancellation of the order for French submarines. Both these persons had spoken to Macron only two weeks before the cancellation became public.

It is certain that both ministers knew of the decision to cancel the French order, yet neither had given the least hint a cancellation of the order had been decided.
It is virtually unheard of for the president of an allied country to call his counterpart in Australia a liar. Morrison reacted angry, denying that he had lied to his French counterpart. He was all hurt innocence, leaping to the defence of Australian integrity. The defence was misplaced. Macron was careful to limit his criticism to that of the prime minister personally. It was entirely Morrison’s gloss to expand the criticism to that of the Australian people.

Morrison is notorious for his weasel words, often arguing a position that completely ignores a contrary statement that he has made only weeks before. No one, certainly no one with the authority of the French president, has baldly called him a liar before. Morrison’s reaction was typical of the man. First, he flatly denied having lied to the French president. Secondly, he deliberately obfuscated Macron’s criticism by claiming to defend the honour of Australians, when, as the filming of Macron’s remarks clearly show, he had been very careful to limit his criticism to that of the Australian prime minister alone, going out of his way to praise his contact with the Australian people in general.

Thirdly, in what can only be described as an unprecedented breach of trust, Morrison released the record of his conversation with Macron, claiming, on the basis of an inquiry from Macron about the progress of the ship building contract, that Macron “knew” that the contract was to be cancelled.

This was, to put it mildly, a strange interpretation of Macron’s question. It has certainly received no support at all from any other quarter. What was most shocking however, was that the Australian government released the contents of a private communication between the two leaders, intending to use it to score a political point. It was, to say the least, a gross breach of protocol and one that has been widely condemned.

The consequences of the breach of protocol will be long-lasting. Foreign political leaders will be reluctant to convey private thoughts to the Australian government in the knowledge that those private comments could at any time be used if the government thought it politically advantageous to do so.

Even if this turn of events were not enough, Morrison’s predecessor as prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, who is known to be a personal friend of the French president, released a statement saying that in his experience Morrison was a notorious liar. Again, this is unprecedented in modern Australian political life for a senior member of the Prime Minister’s own political party going on record that his successor was a well-known and notorious liar.

The Opposition Labor Party, while pretending to be shocked at this sequence of events, could scarcely contain their glee. The country faces a general election in less than six months. The government is already trailing by several percentage points in public opinion polls, and this latest example of bad judgement and even worse behaviour is unlikely to enhance their standing.

For ordinary Australians, the worst part is the inevitable loss in the standing of the country in the world. Already facing widespread criticism because of its appalling record on responding to the challenge of climate change, the latest fracas will have a demoralising effect.

A growing number of people are keen for the next election to occur so that this troublesome government can be finally disposed of.

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