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Populism and international law: the Morrison years in Australia

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ABSTRACT

There exists a growing literature on a claimed populist anti-elitist backlash, within liberal democracies, against international law and institutions. Yet this literature tends to paint generalised trends and lack context-specific studies on where, and with what effects on multilateral engagement, political leaders have used scapegoating or de-legitimisation of supra-national institutions for national-level political advantage. This article is one contribution to addressing this empirical deficit. It considers Prime Minister Morrison's 2019 address attacking the 'negative globalism' of international institutions staffed by an 'unaccountable internationalist bureaucracy'. That address announced a review into Australian multilateralism. The similarity between Morrison's phraseology and that of President Donald Trump (promoting US isolationism) generated alarm among those who value Australia's commitment to (and reliance upon) the 'rules-based international order'. The article assesses Morrison's rhetoric and action in light of the 'populism + international law' literature, the relevance of which continues given the tone of the second Trump presidency. Reinforcing the call for greater empiricism, the article argues that the Morrison example does not necessarily support the literature's assumption of 'populism = multilateral disengagement'. The article also explores the research agenda in exploring tensions between bureaucrats' commitment to multilateralism and their imperative to be responsive to elected leaders.

KEYWORDS

Backlash; foreign policy; international law; populism; multilateralism

Introduction

On 3 October 2019, months after his party's election win, Australia's then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered an annual international affairs lecture. Morrison criticised the 'negative globalism' of supposedly coercive, conformity-imposing international institutions staffed by an 'unaccountable internationalist bureaucracy' (Morrison 2019a). Maintaining that Australian policymaking is answerable to no authority higher than 'the people,' he denounced 'a new variant of globalism' that 'seeks to elevate global

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institutions' above the authority of their member states to make national policy. The speech contained the announcement of a review into Australian multilateralism, a 'comprehensive audit of global institutions and rule-making processes where [Australia has] the greatest stake.'

Contemporaneous commentary on Morrison's address (Coorey 2019; Crowe 2019; Grattan 2019; Koslowski 2019; Laschon 2019; Murphy and Doherty 2019; Murphy and Martin 2019) focussed heavily on the 'negative globalism' phrase. Coverage typically portrayed Morrison's rhetoric as populist and as directly channelling then-incumbent President Donald Trump. Morrison's speech came only a week after Trump's United Nations General Assembly address that questioned the value of multilateralism: 'the future does not belong to globalists, it belongs to patriots' (Trump 2019; also Borger 2019). Couched in these explicit 'anti-globalist' terms antithetic towards global institutions, and directly echoing Trump's use of such terms with an isolationist, anti-multilateralism message, Morrison's announcement of a review into Australian multilateralism caused consternation among Australian academics and bureaucrats working in this field. One law professor told *The Sydney Morning Herald* that the speech 'rang some interesting alarm bells in my head' (Tim Stephens, quoted in Koslowski 2019). The speech and audit/review were received in such circles, and for a time in the Canberra bureaucracy, as heralding isolationism and disengagement, and so as threatening Australia's long-held commitment – as a trade-dependent, strategically isolated middle power – to multilateralism and to what Australian leaders and officials typically call 'the rules-based international order' (e.g. Bishop and Ciobo 2017; Tyler, Gyngell, and Wakefield 2021).

One way to analyse the Morrison speech (with its audit/review announcement) and the aftermath of that (including the review itself) is to approach it by reference to a post-2015 literature that claims that we have witnessed, since the mid-2010s, a distinctive pattern of populist backlash against international law and institutions, coming from leaders within the very Western democracies that hitherto had shaped and championed the liberal international order, and benefited so much from it (e.g. Alston 2017; Crawford 2018; Danchin *et al.* 2020; Humble 2022; Keating and Theussen 2023; McLachlan 2019; Neuman 2020; Orford 2020; Perry 2018; Posner 2017; Rodriguez-Garavito and Gomez 2018; Roth 2017). With some qualifications (Birdsall and Sanders 2020; Danchin *et al.* 2020, 2025a; Ford 2024; Krieger 2019; Lixinski and Morosini 2020; Orford 2020; Rudolph 2019; Schwöbel-Patel 2019), most of this literature expresses alarm about political leaders stirring up this populist backlash against the international legal order, in terms of the potential of their rhetoric and action to undermine the legitimacy and efficacy of that order, or even existentially threaten it.

The gist of the prevailing 'populism + international law' (or 'backlash') thesis is that to respond to and stimulate domestic constituencies, democratic candidates and leaders have dramatically increased their attacks on international law, multilateral institutions and treaty regimes, and supra-national adjudication bodies. The populist political angle, on this account, rejects the idea that the national interest might be advanced in international forums. It presents the 'international' and the 'national' as inherently antagonistic, one automatically contradictory to the latter, or seeking to undermine or constrain it (Farrall 2021, 78). The assumption running through the literature is that 'populism = multilateral disengagement'. This pattern is said to be evident in how

Trump 1.0 and pro- (and post-) Brexit politicians respectively framed international law and governance, as well as in the approaches of ‘populist’ leaders in the 2010s who are otherwise as diverse as India’s Narendra Modi, the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, or Hungary’s Viktor Orban. On this account, the backlash sees international bodies and governance de-legitimised or dismissed or de-funded or blamed. They are framed as foreign impositions on national sovereignty and illegitimate constraints on self-governance, ones that have exceeded their mandates, and that have become remote, unresponsive and unaccountable. This narrative is said to be ‘populist’ in these ways, and in particular for casting the national leadership as finally defending the authentic, long-neglected ‘real people’ against out-of-touch transnational elites that conspire to govern the world in their own interests. This narrative in relation to both national and supra-national institutions and bureaucracies appears to be a key feature of the second Trump presidency.

Proceeding from Morrison’s explicit call to prioritise ‘the people’ against technocrats and a ‘new variant of globalism’, this article reflects on that speech and the audit/review it announced (including the actual process and outcome of the review), analysing these using a thematic approach in light of the narratives of the populist backlash literature. The article does not assess the speech solely as a rhetorical exercise but for the purposes of exploring how populist rhetoric does (or does not necessarily) translate into accompanying actions, such as withdrawing from multilateral engagement. It proceeds as follows. Section ‘Context: populism and multilateralism in Australian politics’ below provides context. After setting out a working definition of ‘populism’, it situates Morrison in a brief survey of the history (a) of Australian populism, and (b) of how multilateralism has featured in recent Australian political discourse. Section ‘Australia’s multilateral engagement: the Morrison audit/review’ draws on purposively sampled interviews with key Canberra stakeholders so as to provide the first scholarly account of the multilateralism audit/review process announced by Morrison that day. This section shows how, despite a freshly-elected leader’s very public direct echo of Trumpish isolationist ‘anti-globalist’ language, and the resulting collective consternation of pro-engagement Australian diplomats and academics, the audit/review did not really change much about Australia’s approach. If anything, it led to *greater* focus on and engagement with various supposedly problematic global institutions and technocracies.

Section ‘Wider implications of the Morrison speech and review’ reflects on this finding in two ways. First, how it contradicts the assumption of ‘populism = disengagement’ in the backlash literature, so reinforcing the need for greater attempted empiricism in that scholarship, including greater nuance around studying rhetorical attacks on institutions versus actual activities to undermine or withdraw from these. Second, how this finding might be situated within scholarship on the role of one set of ‘elite technocrats’: international lawyers and multilateralist diplomatic service officers within bureaucracies in a democracy. If the audit/review had no adverse impact on Australia’s commitment to and engagement with ‘the rules-based international order’, and if federal public servants were instrumental in ensuring that this was the outcome, how should we understand these actors? As a vital, virtuous, invisible college quietly and thankfully ensuring the rule of law in world affairs? Or, as a populist critique might posit, as a problematic unresponsive ‘deep state’ elite, frustrating the express will of the people’s elected leaders? The article shows that an empirical dimension is vital to contextualising some of these

characterisations within the distinct emerging ‘technocrats under populism’ literature. Given recent patterns, in the second Trump administration, of democratic leaders openly blaming public servants for frustrating ‘the people’s will’, such a research agenda takes on greater contemporary relevance.

Context: populism and multilateralism in Australian politics

Populism in Australia in historical perspective

The *New York Times* attributed Morrison’s 2019 election to a populist approach appealing to a ‘silent majority’ of Australians, analogous to those British and American voters attracted to the Brexit campaign and Trump’s first presidential campaign (NYT Editorial 2019). Various scholars have described Morrison’s electioneering and premiership as populist (Moore 2022; Phillips and Murray 2023) or have argued that populism at least ‘played some role’ in his election (McDougall 2019, 499; Johnson 2020). ‘Populist’ is a label with sometimes limited analytical value-add and on which caution is required (Ford 2024). What working conception of ‘populism’, then, suffices for our purposes? These purposes are limited to exploring how Morrison’s ‘anti-globalist’ approach matches up to the assumptions posited by the ‘populism + international law’ literature. ‘Populism’ is arguably more a political style, strategy or set of techniques than an ideology (e.g. Kefford, Moffitt, and Werner 2021), or at most is a ‘thin’ ideology, mobilising claims about representing ‘the [true] people’s [true] will’ to prioritise the executive over other arms of government (Ford 2024, Ch. 1). Common to the vast political science literature (e.g. Arato and Cohen 2021; Moffitt 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019) is the notion that populists claim to be close to ‘the people’ (an imagined homogenous group within an anti-pluralist viewpoint) against the establishment elites; claims to govern directly and authentically for the people, unmediated by institutions; and a distaste for proceduralism – portraying legal and institutional constraints as illegitimate or even foreign impositions that are obstacles to realising the ‘people’s will’.

The literature on Australian political populism reveals some consensus on three things. First, populism has a relatively long post-colonial history. Moffitt has sketched a pre-1950s rural agrarian anti-city populism, to the rank populism of long-time Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1968–1987), through to the 1990s-present patterns of (mostly Queenslander) independent politicians otherwise as politically distinct as Pauline Hanson, Bob Katter, Clive Palmer, and Jacqui Lambie (2017, 124–126; also Moffitt 2022). Second, scholars mostly discern a distinctly Australian strain or version of populism, when contrasted with the phenomenon in American, British or European contexts (McDougall 2019, 494; Moffitt 2017, 122; Moore 2019, 209–211; 2022, 49). For Moffitt, the dominant Australian sub-strain is best described as ‘producerist’, rural, mostly white (the ‘authentic’ or ‘ordinary’ Australians, generally ‘coded as white’), and mostly Right (2017, 132). These are people who, he argues, perceive bureaucrats, inner-city ‘greenies’ and other elites as having ignored, excluded, or worked to undermine this ‘true’ people (including by seeking to redistribute their hard work to undeserving ‘others’ (variously, Indigenous persons, immigrants and/or welfare recipients)). More generally, and less distinctively, Australasian populism has a ‘strong undercurrent’ of

anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism (Moffitt 2017, 136; generally Cathcart, Sawyer, and Hindess 2005). Accordingly McDougall argues (2019, 500) that Australian populism involves passing the ‘pub test’: what the ‘ordinary bloke’ thinks makes common sense as against ‘high falutin’ and far-reaching schemes conceived by liberally minded political elites.

Related to this second pattern – and relevant to reactions in 2019 that framed Morrison’s speech as unprecedented anti-multilateralist populism – is a third pattern. Most scholars agree that for decades now, and well before its Anglo-American peers, Australian populism has largely been mainstreamed within the two major political parties (Moffitt 2017, 123, 126–127, 136; Phillips and Murray 2023; Wear 2008, 631). Wear was the first (2008) to argue that Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) entrenched an era of ‘permanent populism’, whereby electable populist political movements have effectively been displaced (generally Lynch and Reavel 1997; Marr 2017; Mondon 2016). That is, Howard adopted a populist style and agenda to outflank populist right-wing rivals such as One Nation. Australian populists outside the two parties thus tend to be high-profile political actors with prominence but little electoral success: the major parties have routinely appropriated and ‘owned’ their techniques and messages, making populism an ‘acceptable’ form of both Left and Right politics (Moffitt 2017, 126–127, 136). This can be characterised as an Australian-variant mainstreamed populism, rising with Howard, around socio-cultural or identity politics, not just market populism (Snow and Moffitt 2012; cf. Sawyer and Laycock 2009).

Before COVID it might have been arguable that while in such narratives elites are typically negatively linked to globalisation as an economic and cultural threat, prominent concerns or conspiracy theories about global or transnational forces (the UN, G20, etc.) that characterise elements of European and Anglo-American populism did not tend to be a major feature of Australasian populism (Moffitt 2017, 133). However, this historic distinctiveness of Australian populism may be open to question now, in light of the apparent increasingly ready uptake, within Australian political movements, of narratives and ideas from the US and elsewhere. A new, less *sui generis*, strain of (at least Right-wing) populism may be emerging, given how transnational conspiracy theories and tropes of the far-right have been translated and adapted for the Australian context, including by the ‘new Right’ (Busbridge *et al.* 2020). McSwiney has recently shown (2024) that the conditions now exist for greater electoral success by far-right parties in Australia, even if they appear likely to continue to under-perform relative to European ones. Those conditions, which include a pre-existing racialised element (see also Sengul 2024), include greater uptake locally of the transnationalised narratives that feature in US and European populism. Public wariness of the shifting, copy-cat and transnationally informed nature of contemporary populism in Australia may be one factor explaining the strong critical reaction, in October 2019, to Morrison deciding (in his own act of transnational translation) to echo directly Trump’s language on ‘globalists’.

If there is a populist strain in Morrison’s Liberal-National Party (LNP), or instrumental tactical resort to populist messaging to counter independents, it certainly did not start with Morrison (Johnson 2019, 2020). Nevertheless, scholars readily typologise Morrison as ‘populist’. Like others, Johnson (2019, 2020, 96) dwells on how Morrison leveraged his ‘ordinary Australian’ election persona of ‘ScoMo’ – the ‘warm and friendly daggy dad

from the suburbs' who loved sport and a beer at the pub – to undermine Labour's [populist] argument that the LNP coalition supported elites (the 'top end of town'). Johnson has variously described Morrison as a 'neo-liberal populist' (2020, 99 in contrast to Pauline Hanson as 'full-blown' populist) or at least as having a 'populist tinge' and even some 'authoritarian tendencies ... creeping into his populism' (2019).

McDougall (2019, 500) likewise argues that Morrison's projection of himself as 'non-elite suburban dad' relates to the blokey pub-test aspect of Australian populism noted above, such that Morrison was seeking to identify himself with the 'silent' majority against the perceived arrogance of 'untrustworthy leftist elites intent on undermining the Australian way of life.' That is, Morrison can be labelled 'populist' in claiming to speak for the 'quiet Australians' (e.g. Morrison 2019b) advanced as the only true or genuine legitimate source of authority in a democracy, especially when at odds with elected representatives, judges, scientists, scholars, and 'experts' generally (McDougall 2019, 497).

Moore meanwhile (2022, 50–52) would describe Morrison as 'populist-lite' yet argues that, apparently inspired by Trump 1.0 and Brexit, Morrison 'embraced populism tightly' even if he pursued standard neo-liberal policies 'behind his populist façade' of a blokey 'suburban male stereotype'. For Moore, Morrison's encounter with pressing policy issues, notably COVID-19, 'barred him from going 'full populist'' even if his party needed to outflank the 'full and unabashed populist' minor Right parties (2022; also McDougall 2018). While Kelly's assessment (2024) of how Morrison changed Australian politics does not refer to 'populism', it resonates with what the definitional populism literature describes as over-reliance on rhetorical and gestural performativity, and manipulation of public opinion irrespective of the impact on the objective best interests of the polity:

[Morrison epitomised] the ascent of performativity over substance; the elevation of the superficial and simple above the complex; the use of language to repel enquiry rather than communicate ... a way to render language empty, a series of signs with no correspondence to reality ... [t]he perfection of a certain type of politics, in which surface was separated entirely from substance, campaigning from governing.

Contrary to the proposition that Morrison was simply 'of his party' in terms of continuing a [mainstreamed] populism, Kelly argues that Morrison went further, making 'new ways of doing politics plausible.' Morrison's LNP successor Peter Dutton has arguably continued the mainstreamed populism approach (e.g. Blaine 2024). It is not necessary here to reach some attempted categorical assertion that Morrison 'was a populist' or displayed sufficient degrees of populism, howsoever defined, nor to analyse voter views on the 'demand side' (e.g. Kefford *et al.* 2023). It is enough to note that by reference to extant scholarship it is defensible to bring a Morrison study to bear on the literature on a claimed populist backlash against international law, and vice versa.

International law and institutions in Australian discourse

Morrison was hardly Australia's first populist leader, and nor was his 2019 critique of the multilateral system – along with commissioning a review thereof – unprecedented by a prime minister. A thorough historical survey of how the multilateral order has featured in Australian public discourse is beyond this article's scope (but see Chiam 2021; Ford

2020a). However, including because of the shock it generated at the time, it is appropriate to properly contextualise Morrison's 2019 speech and audit/review announcement. Dobell (2021) accurately portrays the range of post-1945 Australian political views on the UN system and multilateralism as swinging between 'Evatt Enthusiasm' and 'Menzies Scepticism' with no party division (Liberal enthusiasts, Labour sceptics). In his view this was supplemented, from the mid-1990s, by 'Howard rejectionism' (Dobell 2010), although his argument is stronger when he accepts that Howard in office was hardly isolationist and is better characterised as a Menzies sceptic: predisposed against multilateralism, but with a pragmatic, selective engagement (in 'the right circumstances' Australia should be an active, constructive UN member: Howard 2010, quoted in Dobell 2010). The multilateralism legacy that Howard left his party cannot simply be dismissed as instrumentalism (cf. Dobell 2019; generally Kevin 2004). For Dobell (2012a), Howard marks a watershed: before him the UN was usually counted in Australian politics as 'a good thing with the occasional potential for greatness.' On this thesis, Howard's 'mental tic' about the UN became a blind-spot bequeathed to the LNP (Dobell 2010). Howard's own position had hardened in retirement, criticising those with a 'childlike faith in the processes of the UN' to whom foreign policy involved 'always adhering to the dictates of multilateral organisations, especially the UN' (Howard 2010; quoted in Dobell 2010).

As noted, Morrison's 2019–2020 review of Australian multilateralism has a direct precedent. In March 2000 Howard announced a 'whole-of-government' review on how the UN human rights treaty committee system affected Australia, including options for 'enhancing Ministerial authority' (Cabinet, 28 March 2000). The government itself saw as the review's catalyst an adverse country report on Indigenous Australians' wellbeing by the UN committee serving the 1965 *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination*. That is, 'long-standing concerns' about the 'focus and manner of operation' of the UN's human rights and refugee committee and protection systems, while re-stating that Australia remained 'committed to and engaged with' these (Cabinet, 28 August 2000). In August 2000, cabinet accepted the Foreign Minister's submissions that these needed 'a complete overhaul'.¹ These submissions were based on the lengthy departmental review before cabinet.² It resolved to ensure that committees did not exceed their mandates, were suitably resourced and coordinated, and that NGOs had a subordinate role in the committee system to (elected) governments.³ Australia's engagement with committees would become dependent on responsiveness of those bodies to these reforms, as part of a 'more robust and strategic' and 'selective' interaction with these bodies, but 'within the framework of Australia's continuing commitment to international human rights standards and monitoring'.⁴ The review recommendations clearly also had a political aspect, with cabinet approving a media statement. The Labour opposition called the review 'deeply embarrassing' and 'another step away from internationalism,' saying that the review would deliver a 'pre-determined' outcome (reduced engagement with the UN system) (Brereton 2000; Dobell 2021). We shall see that this is very similar to the reaction, 20 years later, to Morrison's 2019 speech and audit/review announcement.

In the Howard government's foreign policy (Commonwealth Government 1997, iii–iv) can be seen some of the seeds of October 2019 Morrison-speak:

Australia must be realistic about what multilateral institutions such as the United Nations system can deliver. International organisations can only accomplish what their member states enable them to accomplish. If the reach of the UN system is not to exceed its grasp, it must focus on practical outcomes which match its aspirations with its capability.

By June 2003, Howard's foreign minister observed that multilateralism had increasingly become 'a synonym for an ineffective and unfocused policy involving internationalism of the lowest common denominator' (Dobell 2012b, quoting Alexander Downer MP). The post-Howard (Labour Party) years, especially the Rudd years, were strongly pro-multilateralism, revolving around a UN Security Council election campaign. In its 2010 electioneering and again in 2012 when returned to office, the LNP manifesto (under Tony Abbott) included a promise to assess whether 'appropriate' weighting was afforded, in Australian diplomacy, to international organisations (Dobell 2012a). Pre-election, Shadow Foreign Minister Julie Bishop felt compelled to point out that the LNP was 'not actually proposing that Australia should withdraw from the UN' (quoted in Dobell 2012a). By the time Abbott became Prime Minister in 2012, Dobell's view was that the LNP (with its 'default view of bilateral good, multilateral bad': 2010) still had a 'major problem' with the UN and multilateralism, a 'bee in the bonnet, strange voices in the ether' (2012a). Abbott arguably had a far more rejectionist bent than the pragmatic Howard, whose anti-UN position comes through more in his memoirs.

Dobell in places (2010, 2021) gives his own 'rejectionist/sceptic' typological cast too much weight. For instance, a decision by Howard not to campaign for a UN Security Council seat might be based on rational calculations of success and of diplomatic capital deployment. It is hardly evidence of a determination to undermine multilateralism, much less of pre-Morrison populist backlash. Nevertheless, the rhetorical record certainly bears out Dobell's assessment of Australia as a UN member state that wants to play, and belong, yet is 'prey to moments of doubt and derision' (Dobell 2011) especially under LNP governments. Overall, Dobell (2021) is not alone (e.g. Gowan *et al.* 2020) in observing a paradox in how the LNP 'walk and talk liberal internationalism' and know why Australia needs a rules-based international system, yet (on the other hand, and for voter and intra-party audiences) can tend to 'mock multilateralism and scorn the United Nations'. Yet seen through the 'populism + international law' literature (e.g. Danchin *et al.* 2025a, 2025b), this is not necessarily puzzling: public statements of disdain for the UN may be viewed as directed almost entirely at a domestic political constituency, and/or perhaps at particular mandate-systems, and do not necessarily connote any intention (let alone capacity) to undermine, unravel or even just withdraw from the wider system. The above outline suffices for the purposes of observing that Morrison's 2019 speech is not necessarily a random outlier in his party's decades-old discourses about multilateralism. This provides the context for the hitherto untold story of the audit/review of multilateralism that Morrison commissioned in his 'negative globalism' speech.

Australia's multilateral engagement: the Morrison audit/review

The principal reason for exploring Morrison's October 2019 speech within the context of the populism literature is that he expressly invoked a trope paradigmatic of that scholarship: the self-interested 'elite' versus the long-neglected 'true people'. He spoke of an era

in which ‘elite opinion and attitudes have often become disconnected from the mainstream of their societies’ with resulting resentment and disappointment. His conclusion that ‘[w]e can never answer to a higher authority than the people of Australia’ was made in this context (2019a). His assertion that the people’s will and their unique, authentic, idiosyncratic self-determined destiny was being frustrated by a conformist foreign and global ‘other’ strikes one as paradigmatic of the backlash concept:

...international institutions [that] demand conformity rather than independent cooperation on global issues. The world works best when the character and distinctiveness of independent nations is preserved within a framework of mutual respect. This includes respecting electoral mandates of their constituencies.

... We should avoid any reflex towards a negative globalism that coercively seeks to impose a mandate from an often ill-defined borderless global community. And worse still, an unaccountable internationalist bureaucracy. Globalism must facilitate, align and engage, rather than direct and centralise. (Morrison 2019a)

The next day Morrison doubled down, saying that Australia would not take ‘directions’ from global organisations that ‘are at odds with the national interest and with any presumption that somehow, some global agenda is bigger than Australia’ (quoted in Karp 2019a).

At the time it was not clear whether Morrison had particular parts of the international system in mind. Quizzed by journalists in the ensuing days, Morrison’s ministers appeared unable to articulate which institutions epitomise ‘negative globalism’ (Karp 2019c). Greens leader Richard di Natale (quoted in Koslowski 2019) saw only a ‘thinly-veiled’ gesture to avoid action on climate change. Murphy and Martin (2019) also claim that Morrison meant ‘the United Nations’ especially around climate targets. For others, clearly just speculating, the target was the World Trade Organisation (Grattan 2019), or UN human rights frameworks (Johnson 2019). Morrison Minister Alex Hawke responded to questions about the speech by saying ‘we are all aware about the threat of populism, the threat of protectionism’ (Murphy and Martin 2019). In the speech’s immediate aftermath, Morrison’s Treasurer Josh Frydenberg stated that the sort of institutional overreach that the speech was criticising was ‘the human rights organisation within the UN’ for ‘singling out [Australia] more than North Korea or Iran’ over Australia’s asylum-seeker policies (quoted in Karp 2019a). Referring back to the Howard era, he said that the government wanted global institutions ‘not to berate countries but to work effectively with them’. Frydenberg stated that international institutions were not balanced in their approach. Some months later, the Foreign Minister described the audit’s mandate as Australia’s engagement with ‘key multilateral institutions’ (Payne 2020), without listing these.

For our purposes, the reason to analyse the ‘negative globalism’ speech within the ‘populist backlash + international law’ narrative is because the speech was (then and later) received, and criticised, as populist, or at least as adopting ‘Trump-style rhetoric’ (Koslowski 2019) and the ‘nativist echoes’ (Oquist 2022) of Trump, and in this sense impliedly ‘populist’. Senior political opponents at the time likened it to Trump’s populist-nationalism (Richard Marles MP, quoted in Koslowski 2019), or ‘reminiscent of the right-wing nationalism’ in the US (Senator Penny Wong, quoted in Karp 2019b). A *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion piece called ‘negative globalism’ a ‘controversial

and unhelpful pejorative' phrase, including because of how 'globalists' (used with reference to people such as George Soros) has been used as a euphemism for anti-Semitism (Walker 2019). For Gyngell (2019), the speech was a clear departure from the LNP government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper 'towards the worldview of Trumpism and Brexit ... trailing away of a decades-long period of Australian commitment to an open globalising world and a rules-based international order (a phrase not mentioned in the PM's speech).'

On our working definition above (and within the 'populist backlash against international law' narrative), it is appropriate, for what it matters, to characterise the speech as 'populist': Morrison directly invoked and purportedly spoke for 'the [true or authentic] people' whose interests have been ignored or affected by an unaccountable amorphous bureaucratic or technocratic elite. Consistent with the attributes of 'populists', there he was expressly de-legitimising [international] institutions because they impose upon or do not reflect the will of 'the people'. Seen through the backlash narrative, he can be described as attacking international institutions for domestic political gain despite the national interest.

Unsurprisingly, Morrison's speech was also criticised on grounds *other* than that it was Trumpist and populist. The first of these was that, whether 'populist' or not, the speech advanced a view of the value of multilateralism contrary to Australia's manifest interests. That week the Shadow Foreign Minister described the speech as 'disturbingly lightweight' (Wong, in Karp 2019b). Within months Morrison's predecessor and rival Malcolm Turnbull called the speech 'an embarrassing absurdity' given how, within six months, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how significant multilateral institutions are to global cooperation (quoted in Galloway 2020). Morrison's own cabinet colleagues impliedly criticised the speech by the lengths they went to distance themselves from the 'negative globalism' refrain. The morning after the speech, his Foreign Minister Senator Marise Payne stated that she was 'unfamiliar with the term' as, weeks later before a Senate Estimates hearing, was the Secretary of her department (Karp 2019c). 'International obligations matter' was all that Morrison's minister responsible for climate policy said about the speech that week (Murphy 2019, quoting Angus Taylor MP). Frydenberg valiantly denied that the speech had any echoes of Trump (Karp 2019a). At the time the Foreign Minister said that the speech had not derogated 'in any way from Australia's commitment to elements of the multilateral system which we believe very strongly in' (Karp 2019c). For her the speech had 'set out ... Australia's long-held understanding that our security and our prosperity is absolutely underpinned by the rules-based international order' (Karp 2019a), the ubiquitous Australian policy-speak term that Morrison had avoided.

There is considerable merit to the second ground on which the speech was criticised at the time. As Gyngell (2019) observed then, Morrison's claim that global institutions were somehow being elevated 'above the authority of nation states to direct national policies' is a 'strange claim in a period in which multilateral institutions are weaker in almost all regards than they have been for 40 years.' Morrison gave no examples of this subjugation of national authority. It is indeed curious to characterise state adherence to rules that the state has agreed to as institutions 'demanding conformity.' It tends to reinforce the sense of this aspect of the speech as a populist expediency. That is, Morrison the sovereigntist had erected (and then defended against) a straw man, since Australia cannot be said to be

‘dictated to’ on multilateral regimes that it has voluntarily signed up to after an assessment that these are in its national interest (Walker 2019; Wong in Karp 2019b). ‘Our international commitments have not been forced upon us’ said the Labour opposition at the time (Koslowski 2019), and justifiably. Directly echoing a famous Howard remark, Morrison had stated in the speech that Australia would ‘decide our interests and the circumstances in which we seek to pursue them’. Yet (as Gyngell observed) Australia had never lost the sovereign right to do so, except where it had agreed to certain things (2019), consent that manifests (rather than surrenders) its sovereignty. Weeks after the speech, Australia’s top diplomacy bureaucrat told a Senate hearing that she was ‘not aware of any circumstances in which global institutions could impose their will on independent states’ (Karp 2019c).

The third ground on which the speech was criticised was that it was irresponsible to play domestic politics with foreign policy: ‘just another tactical pivot’ (Oquist 2022) or making ‘decisions against the national interest’ for short-term political gain (Karp 2019b). Turnbull opined that Morrison did not himself believe in his own ‘negative globalism’ line, suggesting Morrison was ‘influenced by people in his office and right-wing commentators’ (quoted in Galloway 2020). Some Canberra political advisor interviewees (see below) suggest that although mostly a multilateralism sceptic, Morrison was not committed to his ‘negative globalism’ line but was just trying different things to see if they ‘stuck’. Alternatively, or in addition, he was merely talking to his party’s Right and the speech was not intended have any real effect on Australian multilateralism.

Yet these three ‘non-populist’ critiques of the speech are precisely the hallmark of the ‘populist backlash’ thesis: that for domestic electoral-political advantage and favour among ‘the people’, leaders charge at self-erected ‘globalist’ straw men in inaccurate, disingenuous and cynical ways while disparaging, dismissing and de-legitimising international institutions, even where these have long served their national interests. Gyngell (2019) gave expression to the widespread negative contemporaneous response to the speech in Australian academic, policy and political circles when he said, the next day, that Morrison’s decision to commission the review ‘might hint at a different agenda.’

Indeed, that shocked, negative or pessimistic reaction to the speech and review announcement in the days following the speech, was one that epitomises the ‘populism = disengagement’ assumption of the backlash literature. The media and commentator reaction analysed above both conveys the sense of alarm at the time, and exemplifies the assumption that populist rhetoric about ‘the people’ versus ‘negative globalist bureaucrats’ will necessarily translate into actual state disengagement from multilateral relationships and mechanisms. The uncertainty and alarm about where Morrison might take the audit/review was not confined to the media, or the author’s circles (international law and relations scholars in Australia). It was a sentiment held within the Canberra foreign affairs bureaucracy. What follows is the first scholarly account of the review/audit announcement fallout, and the process of the audit, as key aspects of the aftermath of the speech.

Before doing so, a note on methods is appropriate. The audit/review report itself, a restricted Cabinet document, was not analysed. In addition to available media coverage of this period (as above), qualitative research interviews were conducted, under ethics approval,⁵ with a select (about 12) set of key individuals. These were current and

former public servants, political advisors and others intentionally chosen as valid and reliable participants or observers with specific and indeed unique experience of or insight on the phenomena under consideration, i.e. the inner workings of the political/policy interface in Canberra around a key review into multilateralist strategy. Elite interviews offer richness and nuance when (as here) analysed inductively within an overall thematic approach (e.g. Naeem *et al.* 2023) exploring recurring or diverging themes or patterns in the data relative to those themes in the literature. However, the accuracy of or generalisations about their data depends on the rigour of the sampling of interviewees. Non-probability purposive sampling (or judgmental or expert sampling, e.g. Battaglia 2008), as used here, is appropriate for small samples from a restricted group, when, as here, the researcher's own expert knowledge is used non-randomly to seek out individuals not because they are representative of a more general group but because they are logically representative of, or a near-complete set of, those with particular experiences relevant to the research question, where a random selection of participants would lack the exposure or experience required. The individuals were purposively and deliberately approached/sampled to shed light on the research questions of whether populist rhetoric necessarily translated into a push for isolationism and disengagement, as the literature tends to assume it does, and to a lesser extent what role bureaucrats might have in shaping how (or indeed whether) apparent populist impulses from leaders in fact find their way into policy changes. This group was not intended as representative of any wider societal cohort, rather as a near-complete set of the key sub-set of players; three declined interviews (and Morrison and fellow cabinet members were not interviewed) but those interviewed were either representative of the sub-set, or held an equivalent or better vantage-point across the relevant time (2019–2020).

Interviewees confirmed that the Foreign Minister's office and her wider department had not seen any part of the speech before delivery nor heard of the Trump-echoing phrase 'negative globalism' until uttered in the speech. They were surprised and dismayed by the direct Trump echo. Within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ('DFAT') various interviewees stated that it was assumed, for at least a few days after the speech, that the audit/review meant that Morrison would simply expect DFAT to give him a list of institutions to withdraw Australia from. This never materialised. The audit was led and completed by DFAT, not the Office of the Prime Minister ('PMO'). It comprised a written report with some data, and a forward strategic plan. It has never been published. The Foreign Minister later explained that the audit 'took stock of where and why Australia is engaging, and how we can best target our efforts to support our interests' (Payne 2020). DFAT had completed it by early March 2020 and taken it across to PMO. Cabinet briefly put it aside due to COVID responses, but picked it up again by late April 2020.

Yet contrary to the backlash literature's presumption of 'populist = disengagement', Morrison (and Australian diplomacy) became *more* engaged in multilateralism, not less, as a result of the audit/review. Interviewees confirm that Morrison and his cabinet embraced DFAT's recommendation that Australia should play a *bigger* role within global bodies, including ensuring more key positions inside international organisations are filled by suitable candidates from Australia or 'like-minded' democracies (see too Galloway 2020). DFAT's report resonated with Morrison and his cabinet, helped by a very supportive Foreign Minister's office. One reason it did so was that DFAT gave direct

examples, rather than simply reiterating stock orthodoxies about ‘multilateralism matters’ and the importance of the rules-based international order. In particular, what reportedly gained traction was the suggestion that Australia and others had been ‘asleep at the wheel’ in neglecting the multilateral system while China, in particular, was infiltrating multilateral bodies to shape agendas and rule-sets in its interests. The speech did not set in motion a fundamental shift (of the sort assumed in the backlash thesis) in how Australia, as a state, engaged with international law and institutions. After October 2019, Morrison made no further reference to ‘negative globalism’ and the like. The doctrine, if it was one, was ‘short-lived’ and ‘over before it truly began’ (Oquist 2022). As noted, no-one within his party took up the phrase and indeed immediately distanced themselves from it. Within months, Australia was deeply leveraging multilateralism. It worked with the European Union at the World Health Assembly for a resolution on an enquiry into the handling of COVID-19, and to overcome deadlock in the World Trade Organisation (Galloway 2020). Australia would ‘continue to be a consistent and constructive voice’ in the international community to advance and protect ‘our national interest and the global interest’ (Payne and Hunt 2020).

By mid-2020, the ‘negative globalism’ device was long abandoned, as illustrated by Payne’s overtly pro-multilateralism speech in June. This reflected cabinet’s adoption of the audit/review recommendations and spoke directly on them. She spoke of close, committed engagement to reform global bodies such as the WHO. She said how the audit/review had ‘affirmed that multilateral organisations, especially international standard-setting bodies, create rules that are vital to Australia’s security, interests, values and prosperity’. She stated that notwithstanding the limitations of these organisations, Australia’s interests were ‘not served by stepping away and leaving others to shape global order for us.’ This was exactly the recommendation of the DFAT review. Australia would rather, she said, try to influence these institutions in its national interest and to preserve the ‘open character’ of global institutions ‘based on universal values and transparency.’ As well as a special focus on placing ‘talented Australians’ into the international bureaucracy, the government took the audit results as informing how it would focus on ‘three fundamental parts’ of the multilateral system: rules around use-of-force and coercion, including in trade and investment; international standard-setting in multiple areas from public health to new technologies; and norms that ‘underpin universal human rights, gender equality and the rule of law.’

For some, Payne’s speech was aimed at persuading her own party of the review’s pro-engagement, anti-isolationist recommendations.⁶ While not delivered in the arguably Trumpish tones of Morrison (her rhetoric about institutions delivering ‘for Australians’ is not inherently populist), her speech did not back away from expressions of concern about the need to reform and constrain some parts of the international order. She noted that the pandemic had highlighted ‘the strengths and the weaknesses of the UN system’ and that Australia would continue to support ‘reform efforts’ to make UN bodies more accountable and effective (Payne 2020). Payne did state that ‘multilateralism for the sake of it is rather pointless’ but it is difficult to characterise such a statement as comprising or continuing a populist attack on the multilateral system. Nor, necessarily, is her framing of multilateral commitments as based on a conception of sovereignty shared, rather than sovereignty yielded. Moreover, such reform-seeking statements from states (about making institutions more accountable or fit-for-purpose) are hardly new to (or

damaging of) the international system. There do not appear to be any grounds for viewing such statements as anything other than ‘business as usual’ for Australia as an engaged and committed but occasionally critical and sensitive UN member state. If there was any lingering concern from October 2019’s speech, by mid-2020 Payne could hardly have been clearer, in terms of the Morrison government’s commitment to ‘positive globalism’, in stating that ‘[e]ffective multilateralism conducted through strong and transparent institutions serves Australia’s interests’ (Payne 2020). The pandemic had ‘brought into stark relief’ (perhaps including within her own cabinet or party room) the ‘major role of international institutions in addressing and coordinating a global response to a global problem.’ The problem was not the global system as such, but that Australia needed to be more pro-active and targeted in assuming roles within it.

The wholly-adopted DFAT report thus helped reinforce an engaged (but reform-seeking) posture for Australia on multilateralism. The gist of both the DFAT report and Paine’s related June 2020 speech come through directly in a 2024 opinion (Nelson and Bassi 2024) co-written by her then chief-of-staff:

The answer is not to give up and let the multilateral system ... be taken over and weaponised by authoritarian powers ... If rule-abiding states vacate the field, it will be left to those who want to bend and distort these institutions so that they ... ultimately prop up their illiberal systems of government. The answer, rather, is to do the hard work to reform these institutions, to make them legitimate and relevant ... As the institutions re-energise, they can compel the attention of capitals that multilateralism is worth the investment of time and resources, creating a virtuous cycle that serves all our interests.

Morrison gave another speech at Lowy, this time in March 2022. For one journalist (Oquist 2022) that speech was notable for Morrison’s ‘epiphany on international cooperation as a means of tackling global issues’ and how ‘his support for the international rules-based order, and the diplomacy necessary to sustain it, took centre stage.’ Morrison, he quipped, had ‘ditched ‘negative globalism’ like it was a bad dream.’ Another observer characterised the March 2022 speech as showing ‘positive globalism’ (Murphy 2022). ‘We believe in a liberal, rules-based global order’ Morrison said. He echoed the idea that this order was under attack. Now multilateral institutions were not the vanguard of a new ‘negative globalism’ intent on dictating to states, but valued ‘well-motivated altruistic’ bodies whose openness and inclusivity had (like liberal democracies) left them vulnerable to autocratic states, something Morrison said he had been warning about ‘for years’. Saying ‘we are most successful when we work with others,’ his speech highlighted relationships and partnerships (‘building webs of alignment’) and ‘taking a multi-layered approach, deepening our bilateral, regional and multilateral engagement’ in support of an order where ‘the same rules apply to all countries.’ Gone was any reference to ‘the people’ save for a line about keeping Australians safe.

What is to be made of this story of a speech with a stand-out populist backlash motif (‘the people’ as sovereign versus elite globalists and bureaucrats) that did not result in the isolationism and rejectionism typically – notably through Brexit and in relation to Trumpism – seen as associated with such narratives? The contemporaneous reaction after the October 2019 ‘negative globalism’ speech (and the audit/review it announced) is somewhat misleading. It would be highly convenient for backlash scholars if the speech heralded a period of withdrawal and isolationism. It would substantiate the backlash

(‘populism = disengagement’) thesis. Yet the inconvenient truth comes in two parts. First, the 2019 speech + review led to *greater* embrace of (reformist) multilateralism. Second, and (as demonstrated above) almost entirely overlooked by media reporting and critics at the time, and indeed by worried DFAT multilateralist officers in early October 2019, Morrison’s 2019 speech was hardly all about withdrawal and disengagement. Advocating a co-operative and respectful internationalism’ (albeit with an emphasis on mostly working with ‘like-minded sovereign nations acting together with enlightened self-interest’), the media did not report that Morrison also said:

Australia does and must always seek to have a responsible and participative international agency in addressing global issues. This is positive and practical globalism. Our interests are not served by isolationism and protectionism.

He then said:

When it comes to setting global standards, we’ve not been as involved as we could be. We cannot afford to leave it to others to set the standards that will shape our global economy. I’m determined for Australia will play a more active role in standards setting.

This paragraph immediately preceded his statement that he had tasked the department with a ‘comprehensive audit of global institutions and rule-making processes where we have the greatest stake.’ A populist-isolationist of the sort assumed in the backlash (‘populism = disengagement’) literature, and of the Trump sort whose ‘globalists’ term Morrison deployed, would not speak in terms of having ‘great stakes’ in the international legal order, or encourage modernisation of the ‘rules and institutions that support global cooperation.’ That is, while the backlash narrative is about rejection of and withdrawal from multilateralism, Morrison framed the review in reverse terms: Australia should get *more* involved in standard-setting; for whatever reason, he did so while also channeling the isolationist anti-globalist terminology, which is what everyone focussed on. When one puts the populist ‘negative globalism’ aspects aside, there is arguably considerable synergy between Morrison’s position in the full 2019 speech (that Australia cannot just be what he called ‘an indifferent bystander’ in the global system) and Payne’s very orthodoxy-restating position in post-DFAT review mid-2020 (Australia’s interests are not served by stepping away from that system).

Wider implications of the Morrison speech and review

This hitherto untold story of the 2019 speech and subsequent review gives rise to at least four avenues for further cross-disciplinary research not limited to multilateral policy in the Morrison era, or Australia.

(i) Modifying the claims of the backlash literature

President Trump’s ‘anti-globalist’ rhetoric in his first term was accompanied by some tangible US moves to withdraw from, dis-engage with, obstruct and/or de-fund various multilateral agencies and treaty regimes (see e.g. Danchin *et al.* 2020; Ford 2020b). It is unsurprising that, framed as it was in recognisably and deliberately Trump-ish terms, Morrison’s 2019 announcement of the review of Australian multilateralism caused some real consternation in Australian diplomatic, policy-making and academic circles.

These are policy circles where it is axiomatic that Australia's long-term national interests manifestly do not lie in US-style isolationism or withdrawal. Instead they lie in promoting a legitimate and effective multilateral legal order that might help underpin Australia's security and prosperity.

Yet notwithstanding the consternation that Morrison's audit/review announcement caused at the time, the upshot was that not much happened. Indeed, the review offered an opportunity for career bureaucrats (plus Payne and others within Morrison's cabinet) to *reinforce* this pro-engagement policy. That opportunity was certainly taken. Moreover, one need not become an apologist for this most other-blaming of recent Australian prime ministers (e.g. Shea and Taylor 2024) to observe that something was lost in the academic and media reaction to the Trump-like elements of Morrison's speech. This was the fact that while Morrison was overall a sceptic of multilateralism, the speech actually called for *closer* engagement in shaping, in particular, supra-national rule-making and standard-setting. The consequent review, which Morrison and his cabinet adopted, led to such greater engagement, at least in terms of more deliberate efforts to staff influential positions in global bodies.

This is a stark reinforcement of recent calls (Danchin *et al.* 2025b) for the backlash literature to be unpacked and heavily supplemented with empirical studies that address the 'disengagement' assumption, and that disaggregate *rhetoric* at the national political level from *action* (treaty regime withdrawal, de-funding, etc.) at the supra-national level. When plotted against any typology of possible state postures on multilateral engagement (notably, Danchin *et al.* 2025b), Morrison hardly led Australia into a period of destructive disengagement. The audit/review announcement was certainly received (at the time) as Trumpist, populist and isolationist, and as potentially threatening Australia's engagement in the multilateral system. This interpretation was certainly open, at least initially and on the reported account of the speech, which suggested that the audit amounted to signalling a less active and committed role and potential systematic Australian disengagement from some global institutions and regimes. Yet in terms of Danchin *et al.*'s rhetoric-action distinction (2025b), (a) rhetorically, in net terms the speech actually called for more engagement, and (b) in action terms, the accompanying review actually resulted in more engagement.

Such are his widely-noted peculiar conceits (e.g. Shea and Taylor 2024) that it is arguably very 'Morrison' to blame the audience for an unbalanced take on his speech, whereas he should have known that almost all the focus would be on the speech's 'negative globalism' aspect, occluding its 'let us engage more' aspects. Nevertheless, read with a dispassionate eye the overwhelming bulk of the speech clearly calls for more engagement, not less. This is the sense in which the speech does not conveniently substantiate the populist backlash ('populists = multilateral disengagement') thesis, while the review led to the opposite of withdrawal, de-funding, etc. Thus one modification to the backlash literature, in addition to the call for more empiricism, is to nuance rhetoric vs. action, in that overt populist messaging suggestive of disengagement and isolationism can coexist with closer engagement, in fact, in the multilateral system.

(ii) Characterising populism in 2019–2020 Australian foreign policy

For some interviewees, who perceived in the Morrison speech a more sinister isolationist purpose, COVID was a blessing because it deprived Morrison of space for any serious withdrawal agenda, and at least one multilateral body (the WHO) was proving useful. Likewise, some suggested that Morrison realised that he could gain more political advantage from being ‘strong on China’ than from persisting with the ‘negative globalism’ angle (on this, see Evans 2024; Hurst 2023; Morrison 2023), and the multilateral system was a vector for doing that (WHA 2020). For some his China narrative was his principal foreign policy posture and even his key 2022 electoral one (Needham 2022). ‘Negative globalism’ certainly was not. However, such speculative positions are open to doubt. COVID did not derail a Morrison backlash (withdrawal) agenda: the pro-engagement review was substantially completed by March 2020, before COVID really impacted politics and governance, and by end-April 2020 had been embraced by Morrison.

Moreover, Morrison’s approach did not just come out of the blue. It reflected genuine concern for some years across Western policymaking that strategies towards global institutions and China (in particular) had backfired: contrary to the assumption that a flexible, tolerant approach would bring emerging powers in and help liberalise them, the view was that instead Beijing was capturing these institutions (less high-profile and more technical ones, too, such as the UN International Telecommunications Union or Interpol), including by flooding them with people. Morrison was cynical about multilateralism, yes. But his speech was, in this sense, simply more crude (or ‘populist’) than his predecessors: it is often overlooked by commentators that his immediate predecessor Turnbull was also aware of and frustrated by perceived dysfunction and capture of multilateral bodies. The Morrison review was an attempt to move on from being reactive: ‘OK, what are we going to do about our dwindling influence multilaterally?’ The approach, especially after the review and as Payne sought to reinforce, was manifestly not ‘we need to leave these organisations’ but ‘we need them to work’. It is notable that Morrison used the term ‘audit’ in his October 2019 announcement, presumably to reduce the sense of withdrawal that the term ‘review’ might hold.

The audit/review was all done before COVID really bit, yet COVID reinforced its basic pro-engagement premises. In particular, the WHO’s initial response to Taiwan flagging the COVID issue (i.e. the WHO simply repeating Beijing’s claims about limited human-human transmission) arguably reinforced to Morrison and colleagues why [reformist] multilateral engagement, not withdrawal, was needed. The DFAT report’s traction had direct policy impact. When the US announced it was to leave the WHO, DFAT held an urgent briefing (given the assumption that Australia typically follows the US). Payne’s office was able to draw on the report to argue against vacating the field of contestation (helped by the WHO’s role in the near Pacific). Some in cabinet and the party were of the view that the post-1945 architectures were obsolete: the review both empowered pro-engagement actors in cabinet and Canberra, and won over, at least in part, key sceptics such as Morrison himself. Indeed, that Morrison was a sceptic yet undertook and accepted the review *helped* its pro-engagement findings to get traction with sceptics. If Morrison had given a stock-standard ‘rules-based international order matters’ speech at Lowy in October 2019, this dynamic might not have resulted.

On one view, nothing much can be read into Morrison’s initial and essentially one-off use of the ‘negative globalism’ mantra in October 2019, nor of how quickly, in early 2020,

he appeared to drop it and about-face overtly in favour of the rules-based international order. In his 2024 essay on Morrison's legacy (see too Shea and Taylor 2024), Kelly argues that Morrison had an astounding ability to simply deny that his own words mean anything like they have widely been interpreted by others to mean: someone unable to take any responsibility for his own words, and for whom the audience is to blame for its misunderstanding. Careful academic analysis of speeches has its limits when dealing with such personalities.

(iii) Exploring the nexus of 'technocrats under populism' and the 'international legal advisor' literatures

The DFAT audit/review story might tell us something of potentially wider application in terms of the role of permanent civil servants in democracies in pursuing their conception of the state's long-term national and foreign policy interests, while being appropriately responsive to the explicit preferences of the elected leadership. The story highlights the general lack of self-awareness or curiosity, in the extant 'populist backlash + international law' scholarship, of the tension between what one might call the democratic mandate and the national interest imperative. Scholars tend to assume that 'populist = disengagement' as if the foreign policy establishment (elected and un-elected) do not contest that disengagement at all. Let us assume the duly-elected Morrison had clearly insisted to his federal public service that it ensure Australia disengage from multilateral bodies and their 'negative globalism'. Let us then assume that the bureaucracy had decided it 'knew better' and would frustrate this goal because it believed that disengagement was contrary to the imperatives of national interest and commitment to the international legal order. In such a scenario it would be much harder to simply dismiss, as baseless conspiracy theory, the populist cry of 'know-better deep state elites illegitimately constraining the people's will.'

For some bureaucrats interviewed, whatever Morrison's anti-globalist intentions or insinuations, there was 'always going to be only one outcome' from any review: it would be 'managed' by them, and the pro-engagement orthodoxy reinforced in any report to cabinet. Asked what became of the October 2019 audit/review announcement, one senior official simply said 'we made it go away – we killed it'. However, this account is unreliable. First, Morrison's speech itself called for greater engagement (buried in the 'negative globalism' shock-factor populism). Second, the bureaucracy did not frustrate, let alone kill, Morrison's will: it made persuasive pro-engagement recommendations, and Morrison's team accepted these. It is true that it took some time for the bureaucracy and foreign policy establishment to realise that the audit represented an opportunity to re-state (to a partially sceptical LNP cabinet audience) the risks of isolationism and withdrawal versus the national interests in an engaged multilateralism. But elected officials such as Payne were also key to this: it was not a conspiracy of unelected officialdom versus populist leader.

Nevertheless, for argument's sake if the 'we [bureaucrats] killed it' response reflected the truth, this would raise significant questions. Arguably, with its 'populist = disengagement' assumption, the backlash literature has not really asked these questions. It has assumed direct transmission from leader to state conduct (especially withdrawal), and not really interrogated the context-rich contours of internal contestation, resistance,

negotiation and persuasion where technocratic and political elites try to modify the impact of isolationist impulses by populist leaders. The spectre of such ‘filtering’ role by bureaucrats (to moderate or wait-out, as they see it, the impact of an elected leader) raises important questions about appropriate transparency and responsiveness in policy implementation within democracies that are experiencing the prevailing populist phenomenon.

Thus a research agenda certainly exists to bring two literatures together, with accompanying empiricism: to bring to bear on the ‘populist backlash + international law’ literature insights from two discrete bodies of literature. The first reflects on the proper role, in a democratic system in high-profile political-legal ‘hard cases’, of the governmental international law advisor (e.g. Aitken 2020; Bethlehem 2012; Bilder 2006; Charlesworth 2005; Dunworth 2009; Franck 2005; Rogers 2005). A starting place for such work would be Schachter (1978), through Koskeniemi (2007) to Orford’s reflections (2020) on international lawyers in the populist backlash. The second body of literature can be termed ‘technocrats under populism’ (especially Bauer 2023; Bauer and Becker 2020; Bauer, Peters, and Pierre 2021; Peters and Pierre 2022).

Such a research agenda, at the nexus of the two literatures just mentioned, arises in terms of establishing how – well before Morrison, and well beyond Australia – career diplomats, international law advisors and foreign policy technocrats serving such leaders have in fact navigated populist positions that de-legitimise multilateral institutions. Again, the ‘populist backlash + international law’ literature has not, in Australia or elsewhere, explored in empirical terms how bureaucracies in democracies in a populist era interpret, cope with, respond to, wait-out, filter, moderate, resist (etc.) populist policy impulses – pursuing the state’s long-term interests while faithfully implementing directions from those leaders with a popular mandate to give them. One insight from the 2019 to 2020 Morrison/DFAT review is that the significant agency of politicians other than the supposed populist figure (here, for example, Foreign Minister Payne) must be factored in: it is artificial to assume, as some of the ‘technocrats under populism’ literature does, that one is dealing with a binary: technocrats resisting or restraining a populist leadership. The reality, our story shows, is a far more plural-actor and nuanced one.

(iv) Reiterating the significance of ‘mere’ rhetoric in international affairs

The final issue would be a response to the view that Morrison’s speech (and even review) was mere domestic political rhetoric and just another tactical pivot in Australia’s endemic short-term political games. As noted, one can risk over-analysing the content of politicians’ speeches that have little enduring significance in the churn of modern democratic discourse. On one view, there is nothing remarkable here: an elected leader criticised amorphous ‘international bureaucrats’ who were likely not his actual target. His likely audience was a purely domestic, perhaps just intra-party, one (i.e. his words were not intended to have any effect internationally); and/or he was making a statement of political ideological principle which, whatever his intended effect, may have had negligible impact beyond Australia.

Yet it does matter in a democracy (and in international law and relations) what elected leaders say and how they say it, while it is the prerogative and indulgence of scholars to analyse such speech. This response arises even if one is not committed to a certain

normative conception of international law as a universalist regulatory idea but is only contingently attached to the ‘rules-based international order’ because of how much a state like Australia benefits from that order. It is a response that does not dismiss this as negligible rhetoric. It says ‘words matter, even if no disengagement happened’ and that ‘such speeches – and explicit de-legitimisation of international governance – are not to be dismissed as mere rhetoric.’ It is an approach that asks how sustainable it is for leaders of a vulnerable, system-dependent middle power like Australia to denounce some elements of that system, damaging its authority and legitimacy by rhetorical attacks, but then expect to benefit from the protections of a robust, credible rules-based order (Ford and Saunders 2025). As Oquist wrote in 2022 (of Morrison raising and then dropping ‘negative globalism’), there are some serious problems with this ‘cynical, flippant’ approach to international relations and strategic policy. Such things require sustained investment and commitment over years and should not simply be ‘switched on and off, or rebranded every two years.’ The ‘negative globalism’ speech story does raise questions about how the selectivity of the ‘rules-based order’ conception (and criticism of some aspects of that order) is compatible with enhancing commitment to the international rule of law, and with exhorting China, Russia, North Korea and others to do so. Morrison’s approach would eat its cake (de-legitimise the system, including with amorphous generalised critiques) while also keeping its cake (the powerful idea of a constraining international legal order as a robust resource and infrastructure in Australia’s security and prosperity).

Still, Australian federal governments are hardly alone among states in foregrounding international law and mechanisms when it suits, and downplaying international legal obligations and commitments when these are politically adverse or electorally problematic. To the extent that Morrison’s administration did a bit of both, it might be indistinguishable from its predecessors. Depending on how ‘damage’ is defined in the ‘backlash’ literature (see Danchin *et al.* 2025b), it is possible that the only damage done by the Trump-like lines uttered on 3 October 2019 was to Morrison’s own credibility among the majority of his parliamentary party colleagues, and among those serving his administration on foreign policy.

Conclusion

The early months of this second Trump presidency suggest that we will continue to see elected leaders scapegoat international organisations and bureaucrats (as Morrison did in October 2019), yet often actually continue to maintain a deep engagement with multilateralism, or at least some significant aspects of it (as Morrison’s cabinet did in 2020, post-review). Morrison’s October 2019 address, effectively contrasting the Australian people with unelected foreign bureaucrats, relied explicitly on the ‘globalism/globalists’ rhetorical device used by President Trump only a week earlier. Trump’s use accompanied an essentially isolationist anti-institutional agenda. Unsurprisingly, Morrison’s use triggered both criticism for its populist tone and concern that the accompanying audit/review would likewise de-couple Australia from multilateralism. Yet the rhetoric did not result in such action for the reasons explained here. Even if Morrison’s speech and review are a clear exemplar of the ‘populist backlash’ trend, this is not necessarily to be condemned, for three reasons. First, state backlash against global governance

bodies can be an entirely legitimate or unremarkable occurrence, especially in cases of over-reach and mandate-creep by international institutions (Crawford 2018, 6).

Second, as easily as one could dismiss Morrison's criticism of 'globalist conformity' as 'populist' one could, framing things differently, instead portray this as an elected leader being deeply responsive to widespread concerns about some socio-cultural and economic aspects of globalisation, migration and integration, and the widely perceived role of international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation in flattening out the world to facilitate capitalism. The irony, of course, is that only a truly out-of-touch elite (in the classic populist refrain) could adopt the reflex position that anyone expressing concerns about some of the socio-economic and cultural aspects of globalisation is then to be mocked as a deplorable 'populist'. Finally, a blind-spot risk might arise when certain views on the relationship between global governance systems and national-level populations are dismissed as 'populist' and reactionary. The risk is that such dismissal would prevent much-needed reflection on where and how supra-national rule-making and governance bodies could become more responsive to legitimate and inevitable popular sovereignty concerns. The supposed universal normative underpinnings and socio-economic benefits of multilateral commitments and institutions are probably just not self-evident to many voters. It would be somewhat ironic, in dismissing such feedback as 'populist', for the academy and bureaucracy to display all the hallmarks of the out-of-touch, non-empathetic, condescending transnational elite that is the very target of the populist style of politics.

Notes

1. Cabinet Submission JH00/0284/CAB, 28 August 2000, 3, Recommendation 1(a); adopted Cabinet Minute JH00/0284/CAB, 28 August 2000, 1, para [1](a).
2. Cabinet Submission JH00/0284/CAB, 28 August 2000, Attachment E.
3. Cabinet Minute JH00/0284/CAB, 28 August 2000, 1, para [1](a)(i).
4. Cabinet Minute JH00/0284/CAB, 28 August 2000, para [1](b).
5. Ethics Approval No. H/2023/1181 (Human Research Subjects: Interviews) for Australian Research Council project DP230102088, granted by ANU Human Research Ethics Committee on 12 September 2023.
6. Some interviewees also opined that Payne has not been given enough credit for ensuring that the government did not go further down the inward, isolationist, bilateralist path implied by the 'negative globalism' critique.

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Ethics statement

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