



PROTHEAN INSTITUTE
POLICY BRIEF | MAY 2026

Decorum Discarded:

How the Anglosphere Political Class Broke a Working Bilateral Norm and Sent the Bill to Its Own Publics

Paper 2 of The Divergent Societies series

The Divergent Societies series examines three things happening at once across the late-modern Anglosphere. American politics has diverged from the rest of the West. Western societies have diverged from their own historical foundations. And Anglosphere political classes have converged with each other on a managed-decline trajectory while their countries diverge from their own past. The series asks how this happened, why conventional analysis missed it, and what the structural mechanism actually is.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For roughly seven decades after the Second World War, Anglosphere bilateral relationships ran on a working norm. Leaders disagreed on policy through diplomatic channels. They maintained public respect for the office of their counterpart regardless of partisan distance. Bush worked with Blair across an opposite-party divide. Obama maintained civil bilateral relationships with Australia's Howard, Abbott, and Turnbull, and with Canada's Harper, despite ideological gulfs much wider than current commentary remembers. The norm was not warmth. It was decorum. Disagreement was real. Theatre was rare.

Beginning in 2017 and accelerating through both Trump administrations, that norm has been systematically discarded by Anglosphere political classes outside the United States. Justin Trudeau, Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel, Anthony Albanese, Mark Carney, Keir Starmer, and

the broader political and commentariat classes of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have performed hostility toward the elected leader of the United States. They performed it for domestic political dividend and for cultural-class signalling. The Biden-era return to decorum confirmed what was already visible. The same political classes had only minor substantive policy disagreements with Biden. They returned to civility the moment the cultural class permitted it. The hostility was not a response to Trump's policies. It was a response to Trump as a category as paper one "The Idiot Reading" in this series outlined in greater detail.

This brief argues three additional things. The discarding of the norm is qualitatively novel. The costs of discarding it are real and bilateral. Those costs are being paid by the publics of the countries whose political classes did the discarding — not by the political classes themselves. The norm protected something. The discarding has cost something. Both propositions deserve to be named.

1. The Working Norm

From the end of the Second World War through approximately 2016, Anglosphere bilateral relationships were governed by a convention. The convention was neither written nor formally agreed. But it was substantively operative across leaders, parties, and decades. It had three components.

First, policy disagreement was expressed through diplomatic channels. Not through domestic political theatre. A British prime minister who disagreed with an American president about trade, security, or strategy raised the disagreement in private bilateral meetings, in coordinated public statements, in official communiqués, or through the diplomatic services. The disagreement might be sharp. It was contained in venues built to manage it. The same prime minister did not stand in front of a domestic audience and perform contempt for the president to score points at home.

Second, the office of the counterpart was respected regardless of who occupied it and regardless of how deeply you disagreed with their policies. Tony Blair worked with George W. Bush across the Iraq commitment despite operating on the opposite side of the British political spectrum from the American conservative consensus. The cost to Blair's domestic political position was substantial. He absorbed it because the bilateral relationship was more important than the partisan dividend available from theatrical separation. Stephen Harper worked with Barack Obama through the Keystone XL dispute — a genuine bilateral fight on a substantive issue Harper cared about — without performing personal contempt for Obama. Tony Abbott's ideological distance from Obama was about as wide as Western politics gets. The bilateral working relationship was nevertheless maintained without theatre.

Third, leaders disciplined their own domestic media performances about their counterparts. Disagreement could be aired. Personal contempt could not. The convention recognised that domestic media performances by a prime minister about a foreign president are themselves diplomatic acts. They are heard, reported, and remembered in the counterpart's capital. The convention had to govern those performances if it was to govern anything.

The convention was not always observed perfectly. Personalities clashed. Specific bilateral relationships had cooler or warmer registers depending on the leaders involved. But the convention held in its essentials. Across alternations of party. Across major substantive disagreements. Across the post-Cold War period in which Anglosphere political classes became progressively more aligned with each other on cultural and policy terms. The convention was the protective infrastructure on which the bilateral relationships ran.

2. The Disruption

From 2017 onward, the convention has been visibly and systematically discarded by Anglosphere political classes outside the United States. It has been discarded with respect to one specific category of American counterpart. The elected presidency of Donald Trump.

The pattern is visible across multiple capitals and multiple specific leaders. The 2018 G7 summit in Charlevoix, Quebec, included a now-famous press performance by Justin Trudeau. The Canadian prime minister attacked American tariff policy in language designed for the Canadian audience, not for the bilateral relationship. The performance was prepared. The framing was rehearsed. The domestic political pay-off was the point. Trump's response was to withdraw American endorsement of the joint communiqué and to attack Trudeau publicly in terms that did not fit the prior convention either. The convention had been broken from the Canadian side first. The American response broke it further.

Trump's social-media diplomacy, his personal insults at foreign counterparts, and his public conduct of negotiations were also departures from the prior decorum standard. The point is not that the U.S. side was disciplined while the others were not. It is that a disciplined counterpart can hold the convention unilaterally despite U.S.-side breaks. Japan, across both Trump administrations, has kept the bilateral working register intact. Mexico, despite a substantively harder bilateral relationship under the second Trump administration, has largely kept its public conduct professional and channelled disagreement through proper venues. The convention does not require both sides to maintain it for one side to hold it. The Anglosphere political classes had the option of disciplined bilateral conduct regardless of what the U.S. side was doing. They chose not to exercise it.

The Macron and Merkel choreographies at successive G7 and G20 summits across the first Trump term followed the same logic. Public handshake theatre. Prepared body language. Calibrated facial expressions in front of cameras. These are not the moves of bilateral disagreement. They are the moves of signalling to your own domestic audience. The signalling was directed at progressive audiences in Paris, Berlin, and across the European centre-left. The audiences understood and rewarded it. Macron and Merkel each got a domestic political benefit from being seen to perform hostility. The cost — bilateral standing with the United States — was left to their successors and to their countries' broader position.

In Australia, senior political leaders held to better public discipline than in Canada or France during the first Trump term. Malcolm Turnbull, despite the leaked transcript of his early call with

Trump, kept his public conduct professional. Scott Morrison dealt with the Trump administration in a workmanlike way. But the Australian commentariat, the public broadcaster, and a large part of the political class around the leadership did not hold that line. The progressive signalling was visible in the Australian media from 2017. The leadership only partly restrained it. Under the Albanese government from 2022, even that restraint slipped. Albanese's public posture toward the Trump 2.0 administration is visibly more hostile than his posture toward Biden was, even retaining Kevin Rudd as ambassador despite incredible personal animosity between him and Trump. The two American administrations had broadly similar policies on the issues that mattered to Australia. So the difference cannot be explained by policy. It is about Trump.

In Canada, the second Trump administration has produced an even more concentrated form of the dynamic. Mark Carney's positioning relative to Trump has been calculated for domestic political dividend in ways inconsistent with the prior convention. The provocations are not coming from Washington in the first instance. They are being generated in Ottawa and Toronto for reasons internal to Canadian politics. The bilateral consequences are being treated as acceptable collateral cost.

In the United Kingdom, Keir Starmer has triangulated. He neither performs the open hostility of Trudeau and Carney nor maintains the working warmth of historical Labour-Conservative bilateral conventions. The triangulation is itself participation in the cool-kids dynamic. It is just less theatrical. Starmer's domestic political audience must see that he is not too close to Trump, even as he conducts the necessary bilateral business. The convention required that the bilateral business be conducted without the visible domestic-political triangulation. That requirement has been discarded too.

The dynamic is not just about the presidency. The same Anglosphere commentariat extends substantively the same contempt to senior administration figures who present nothing like Trump. JD Vance. Pete Hegseth. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Vance's Munich Security Conference speech in February 2025 was met across European political-class media with the same hostility the political class had reserved for Trump. And yet Vance's look, education, and way of speaking are much closer to the European political class's own self-image than Trump's ever was. Hegseth's defence-ministerial counterparts have, with a few exceptions, kept an unusual level of public coolness toward him. Kennedy has been treated at international health-policy meetings and by counterpart ministries with a coldness that does not match the prior convention. There is no domestic political pay-off for a foreign minister to attack a US Secretary of Defence. So the cool-kids logic should not extend to these officials. The fact that it does anyway shows the dynamic is not really about the American presidency.

What the four believe is examined in detail in the companion brief¹. The main markers are public commitment to faith, to family, and to the view that the West has an inheritance worth defending. Trump, Vance, Hegseth, and Kennedy each carry these markers in different forms. The establishment has spent the post-Cold War period building itself to suppress them. The bilateral convention has been discarded specifically against the group that publicly carries this programme.

The same political classes restored the convention during the Biden administration. Not because Biden's policies were materially different from Trump's on the issues they most cared about. They restored it because Biden was inside the cultural-class deal the convention had been quietly amended to protect. The convention now applies, in practice, only to American leaders who do not threaten that deal. That is no longer a convention. It is a partisan instrument.

The Biden-era return to decorum is the control case, and it settles the diagnosis. Hold policy roughly constant — Biden's positions were broadly Trump's on the issues these political classes cared about most — and the hostility still switches off. The variable is not policy. It is whether the American leader sits inside the establishment's settlement or against it. The companion brief documents what Trump, Vance, Hegseth, and Kennedy share, and why that is what triggers the response.

3. What Was Discarded

The discarding has been treated, where it has been noticed at all, as a series of personality-driven incidents. Trudeau's temperament. Macron's ego. Albanese's partisanship. Each of those readings is true at the surface. None addresses the structural fact that the personalities were behaving in synchronised ways across multiple jurisdictions in response to the same external stimulus. What was discarded is not reducible to the behaviour of any single personality. Three components of the prior convention were specifically and observably abandoned.

The separation of policy disagreement from political-class hostility

Under the prior convention, disagreement on policy was fought hard through diplomatic and political channels. The disagreement did not spill over into hostility toward the office or the person of the counterpart. Obama and Abbott disagreed on climate policy with real force. The disagreement was real, public, and aired through the proper venues. It did not turn into Abbott performing personal contempt for Obama, or Obama performing personal contempt for Abbott. The two were kept separate. That separation was the convention. Under the post-2017 dynamic, the separation has collapsed. Policy disagreement is now expressed as personal contempt and cultural contempt. The contempt is the primary signal. The policy substance is a secondary matter, or absent.

The convention of disagreement-through-channels

Under the prior convention, bilateral disagreement was fought through diplomatic communiqués, official statements, joint press conferences with managed framing, and private bilateral meetings. Contents were leaked only when leaks served specific diplomatic purposes. Domestic political theatre was not the venue. Under the post-2017 dynamic, domestic political theatre has become the primary venue. Disagreement is announced first to the domestic audience for domestic

political pay-off. The diplomatic channels follow the theatre rather than the other way around. The convention required the opposite sequence. That sequence has been inverted.

Leadership-level discipline of media performances

Under the prior convention, leaders disciplined their own media performances about counterparts because they understood those performances to be diplomatic acts. The discipline was self-restraint. It recognised the bilateral relationship as more important than the small domestic political benefit available from a theatrical media moment. Under the post-2017 dynamic, that discipline has largely broken down. Leaders now perform for domestic audiences on the apparent assumption that either the bilateral relationship will not be affected by the performance — so it costs nothing — or the bilateral cost is acceptable given the domestic gain. Both assumptions are wrong. The bilateral cost is real. And the costs do not stop at the leader who incurred them.

4. The Bill, and Who Pays It

The discarding of the convention has produced bilateral consequences across multiple domains. The consequences are not paid by the political classes that incurred them. They are paid by the publics of the countries whose political classes performed the contempt theatre.

Trade access is the most concrete instance. The second Trump administration has explicitly differentiated tariff treatment, market access, and trade-deal prospects across counterpart countries on the basis of the bilateral relationship. In practice, that means on the basis of how the counterpart political class has treated the administration. Countries whose leaders performed open hostility have received less favourable treatment than countries whose leaders maintained decorum. Italy under Meloni, Argentina under Milei, El Salvador under Bukele, India under Modi, and Japan under recent governments have received materially better trade and bilateral treatment than Canada, France, Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom over comparable periods. The differential is not concealed. It is announced. The political-class members who performed the hostility do not pay the differential. The exporters, workers, and consumers in their countries pay it².

Intelligence cooperation and defence procurement follow a similar pattern. The Five Eyes architecture is institutional and durable. The operational warmth within the architecture is not. Bilateral intelligence relationships at the working level depend on political-level relationships at the top. Political-level relationships have visibly cooled with the Anglosphere countries whose political classes performed hostility. Defence procurement decisions, AUKUS posture, technology-sharing arrangements, and joint exercise schedules are influenced by these relationships. The Australian public will pay the bill for AUKUS coolness if it materialises. That bill will be denominated in capability and timing rather than dollars. The dollar bill will follow.

The strategic position of the relevant publics is also worse than it would have been if decorum had been maintained. A middle power's leverage in the world today depends heavily on its working

relationship with the United States. Prothean has set out the leverage analysis in detail elsewhere³. Anglosphere middle powers whose political classes have spent the period since 2017 showing their own domestic audiences that they hold elected American leaders in cultural-class contempt have weakened their countries' leverage in the world that actually exists. The leverage was not theirs personally to spend. It belonged to their publics. They spent it on cultural signalling. The publics now have less of it.

The political classes performed contempt. The publics paid the bill. Restoring the convention requires recognising both halves of that proposition explicitly and naming who is responsible for which half.

5. Why This Will Continue Until It Is Named

The dynamic described in this brief will not self-correct. The political-class members who incurred the bilateral costs are not the political-class members who pay them. The cultural-class audiences who reward the contempt theatre are not the publics who absorb its consequences. Under those incentive conditions, the theatre will continue.

The corrective requires three recognitions. The first is empirical. The discarding of the convention is something new. It is structural. It is happening across multiple countries at once. It is producing bilateral consequences you can see. The reading that treats each incident as a personality clash is wrong. The personalities are not driving the dynamic. The dynamic is selecting for the personalities. A separate Prothean brief examines the structural mechanism in detail — how synchronised political-class behaviour emerges across Anglosphere countries without coordination, why it spreads in one direction only, and what pressures sustain it. That mechanism is not the subject of this brief. The pattern, and the cost it is generating, is.

The second recognition is dispositional. Bilateral decorum is a discipline, not a sentiment. It does not require warmth, agreement, or affection. It requires the separation of disagreement from hostility, the channelling of disagreement through proper venues, and leadership-level discipline of media performances about counterparts. These are professional standards. The political class is capable of meeting them and previously did. The standards have been abandoned for cultural-class signalling reasons that do not survive examination. They can be reinstated through the same mechanism by which they were abandoned. Political-class members deciding to meet them again.

The third recognition is accountability. The political classes that incurred the bilateral costs should be named for incurring them. The publics that are paying the costs should be told who incurred them. The current framing — in which the bilateral coolness from the second Trump administration is described as further evidence of Trump's unreliability — has the causal sequence reversed. The hostility from him is following the hostility from them. The publics who are paying

the bill should know that their political classes spent their bilateral leverage on cultural-class signalling. They should know that the cost is being denominated in trade access, intelligence cooperation, defence procurement, and strategic standing. Once that is known, the political-class incentive structure changes. While it remains unknown, the theatre will continue. The bills will continue to arrive.

Conclusion

The bilateral convention that governed Anglosphere relationships from 1945 to 2016 was not a sentimental tradition. It was the protective infrastructure on which a remarkable set of bilateral relationships ran successfully through periods of substantial disagreement. It permitted Bush and Blair to prosecute the Iraq commitment together across an opposite-party divide. It permitted Obama and Abbott to disagree on climate without rupturing the bilateral working relationship. It permitted Obama and Harper to fight over Keystone XL while maintaining everything else. The convention worked. Its working was not noticed because conventions that work are noticed only when they stop working.

It has stopped working. The cause is not Trump. He has been the occasion, not the source. The prior administrations these same political classes worked with, and the Biden administration that followed, show that they are capable of decorum when their cultural class permits it. The cause is a decision by Anglosphere political classes to abandon the convention in one specific case, for one specific reason. There was a cool-kids dividend on offer for performing contempt for an outsider the cultural class had decided was beyond the bounds of normal political treatment. The decision was rational for each individual politician's career. It was catastrophic for the bilateral relationships those politicians were supposed to be managing.

The convention can be reinstated. Doing so requires the political classes to recognise three things. They discarded the convention for reasons that do not survive examination. The costs are being paid by their publics, not by themselves. The corrective is a return to standards they previously maintained without difficulty. The first step is to name what was discarded. This brief is that naming.

Notes

¹ On the diagnostic detail of the ideological signal that has displaced bilateral decorum, see Prothean Institute, *The Idiot Reading: Why the Anglosphere Right Still Thinks There's an Idiot in the White House*, Policy Brief, May 2026, particularly Section 3. The deeper civilisational analysis on which both briefs draw is set out in Prothean Institute, *Lost Coherence: Unified Social Energy, the Monument Problem, and the Structural Conditions of Civilisational Flourishing*, Whitepaper, March 2026, and *Thus Spake Ilos*, Whitepaper, April 2026.

² Quantitative substantiation for several of the claims in this section — including NATO defence-spending differentials, the bipartisan retention of Trump-era trade architecture, and the Abraham Accords trade and security data — is set out in the empirical appendix of Prothean Institute, *The Idiot Reading*, op. cit. The two briefs are reciprocal: this brief documents the bilateral consequences of the misreading; that brief documents the empirical record demonstrating that the reading itself is incorrect.

³ On leverage as the operative currency of contemporary middle-power strategy, see Prothean Institute, *The Multilateral Illusion: How the West Chose Comfort Over Reality — and What Comes Next*, Policy Brief, March 2026, particularly Section 4.

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent strategic research organization dedicated to understanding, preserving, and renewing the foundations of thriving societies.

Our mission is to develop political, cultural, and social frameworks that are deeply aligned with the structures, instincts, and emotional architectures that sustain human flourishing across generations.

Our work focuses on:

- Developing strategic whitepapers, policy briefs, and advisory documents to support effective governance and leadership.
- Conducting philosophical, historical, and behavioral analysis of political and cultural trends.
- Equipping leaders with frameworks that connect emotional resonance to rational clarity and practical governance.

At the Prothean Institute, all policy recommendations and strategic analyses are grounded in strict epistemic rigor and the reality of real-world conditions and human nature. Idealism, where entertained, is explicitly noted as distinct from core analysis. We reject abstractions untethered from reality and seek to equip leaders with tools that work in the world as it is — not as we might wish it to be.