

He's the right man at the right time

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Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's appointment of Kim Beazley as our next ambassador to the United States is extremely savvy.

There are three types of appointees to Washington: the public servant (Michael Cook and Dennis Richardson), the personal envoy (Don Russell and, arguably, Michael Thawley) and the party elder (Sir Percy Spender and Andrew Peacock). Each of these models can work — but a party elder holds particular appeal at this juncture in the relationship between Australia and the US.

Beazley has the gravitas of a former deputy prime minister and opposition leader. He served in these exacting offices for a combined period of more than eight years. Beazley was not a comet shooting briefly across the sky: he was a long-serving, important contributor to Australian public life. He will now continue that service in an intensely political city that respects political seniority.

He will also go to Washington with the respect and affection of the Australian Government, including not only the Prime Minister but Beazley's former close colleagues Stephen Smith and Senator John Faulkner.

Beazley has a wide network of friends and contacts in the US built up over innumerable visits, including many serving in senior posts under President Barack Obama. He knows a lot about America and has a good deal of affection for the place. Like everyone, Americans tend to like people who like them.

Finally, and most importantly, Beazley is well equipped to deal with both the hard and soft elements of the alliance in the Rudd-Obama era.

As a former longstanding defence minister and a strategic analyst, there would be few Australians better placed than Beazley to deal effectively with the Americans on defence issues, including the Afghanistan war, defence co-operation and intelligence sharing, access to US defence technology and software, and defence policy perspectives on Asia.

However, there is much more to the Australia-US relationship than simply a military alliance.

Typically, it reflects the personalities and priorities of the two incumbent heads of government. The Howard-Bush era certainly involved the closest possible military co-operation on Iraq and Afghanistan, but it also saw the negotiation of a wide-ranging bilateral free trade agreement.

Now that the relationship is being managed by a Labor prime minister and a Democrat president, it will naturally take on something of the red-green tint of the two leaders.

Rudd's instinct is to engage Obama and his Administration right across the global agenda, including climate change, the global financial crisis, multilateral institutions and the emergence of China. As a former party leader, Beazley has the breadth to cover all these issues and similar policy instincts to both governments.

Beazley will take up residence in his gracious new home in north-west Washington at a time when there is almost no domestic animus against the alliance. One reason for this is the fact that President Obama is well liked by Australians whereas president Bush was disliked. But there is a structural explanation as well as a personal one.

As former Labor leader Mark Latham's diaries revealed, the Labor Party contains a diversity of views on America's role in the world. However, the disciplines of office and the realities of diplomacy — not to mention Rudd's own pro-American inclinations — have quietened any negative feelings. At the moment, alliance sceptics have no significant presence in Canberra or in the wider public debate.

Beazley will face two particular challenges in his new role, however.

The first is Afghanistan. The Obama Administration is doubling down in Afghanistan and may want additional assistance from its allies in a war that is making Western people increasingly uncomfortable. Beazley's task will be to emphasise to the Americans the extent of our contribution, manage their expectations about future deployments and, where he can, help the Government to make the case to Australians that Afghanistan is a fight in which we should be engaged. Further Australian casualties will make this task harder.

The second challenge, of a different type, is Obama's global popularity — a good thing for a US ally such as Australia but a mixed blessing for an ambassador trying to get the Administration's attention. Beazley will have to elbow his way past the new ambassadors, foreign delegations and visiting leaders who are thick on the ground in Washington. Furthermore, Obama is not particularly sentimental about alliances, and his knowledge of Australia is thin. Beazley will want to build on the promising relationship that is developing between Rudd and Obama.

Australia's new ambassador will have to work hard to earn his keep — but no one could be better prepared for this job, at this time.

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