

Downer's taunts not proper for UN envoy

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IT SEEMS that relevance-deprivation syndrome has struck again. At the weekend, the former foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer made headlines with crude comments about the former prime minister Kevin Rudd.

"I don't use the c-word," said Downer, "but I do use the f-word pretty freely, and I can tell you that Kevin Rudd is a f---ing awful person."

This was not the only character assessment Downer has provided of Rudd recently. In fact, he's becoming something of an op-ed stalker. In a June article in *The Spectator*, for instance, he commented on Rudd's "conceit and vanity" and ruminated on the former PM's motivations in life: "Rudd wants fame. He wants to be on TV every night. He wants to be recognised everywhere he goes. He wants to be the centre of attention."

These comments are bitchy. Some would say they are hypocritical. They are certainly ungracious, given that Rudd lobbied the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to appoint Downer as his part-time Special Adviser on Cyprus when he retired from politics in 2008.

And they are hardly becoming for an international civil servant.

It is not customary for the Secretary-General's special envoys and advisers to involve themselves in partisan, even nasty, politicking while they are in harness for the UN. Naturally these individuals retain their personal beliefs: they do not become political geldings. Sometimes they return to political office at home when their UN work is done. But while they are engaged in international politics, they tend to remain aloof from domestic politics.

It is especially strange that Downer is arcing up at Rudd now, given that the Cyprus negotiations over which he is presiding are entering a critical phase.

Why would he freelance on Australian domestic politics in a way that can only cast doubt on his judgment and gravitas? Why become the focus of discussions in Canberra when he's meant to be orchestrating discussions in Nicosia?

And given the stakes in the Cyprus dispute, does Downer even have time for this

kind of self-indulgence?

Many observers thought it was curious that Downer wanted a UN role at all, given that he rarely had a good word to say about the organisation while he was in government. Having taken on the job, though, he would be well advised to play the statesman, not the bruiser.

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