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Mr Peters goes to Washington

By Stephen Jacobi ¹

Writing to the NZ US Council after last April's inaugural US NZ Partnership Forum, US Ambassador Bill McCormick observed "it is not deliverables that matter, it is the relationship".

Foreign Minister Winston Peters' visit to Washington this week needs to be seen in that context.

It should be the most normal thing in the world for New Zealand, with a strong interest in making progress on global issues like peace and security, sustainable development and freer and fairer trade to have its Foreign Minister become a regular visitor to the capital of the world's leading superpower.

Of course this is Mr Peters' first visit in his new(ish) role so it is bound to attract more than usual attention.

The visit also comes at a time of noticeable warming in the relationship.

Prime Minister Helen Clark's appearance at the 4th July function in Wellington is evidence of that, as were the positive comments about the relationship made to Australian media on 8 May by Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill.

"I just feel that the United States and New Zealand should be doing more things together", Hill was reported as saying. "Rather than trying to change each others' minds on the nuclear issue, which is a bit of a relic - we're not demanding to put ships in New Zealand - I think we should focus on things we can work on."

Chris Hill's comments challenge the contention that the relationship is in free fall, despite the tendency in some quarters to describe it in this way.

Similarly the Partnership Forum set out to highlight the many areas where New Zealand and the United States can and do work positively together as well as the scope for further co-operation.

Of surprise to some was that the Forum actually achieved what it set out to do.

Its success was not that it led to any immediate breakthroughs on trade or defence but because of the opportunity and space it gave to governments and business to talk about taking the relationship to a new level.

Continuing high level engagement with the United States is important to New

Zealand's national interest as it provides a framework against which business can be done at other levels.

In remarks made public after the Partnership Forum Under Secretary of Commerce Frank Lavin called for a relationship between the two countries which had "mutuality, predictability and integration".

Mr Peters' visit is part of an ongoing effort to put the relationship on that sort of footing.

There is no shortage of issues for him to discuss in Washington, particularly at a time when the United States is concentrating on what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice calls "transformational diplomacy" - working with partners around the world to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people as well as conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.

New Zealand is one such partner for the US both in the Pacific and beyond.

Mr Peters' views on developments in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, North Korea, Afghanistan and the Middle East will be sought after and appreciated by Rice and other senior politicians he will meet.

American insights into global issues such as terrorism, development, climate change and avian influenza will be of direct relevance to us.

At the same time there are some issues on which the two countries clearly disagree.

We should not deduce from Chris Hill's comments that American dismay at New Zealand's anti-nuclear policies has subsided.

An alignment of interest doesn't necessarily translate in unanimity of view.

Differing views on the Kyoto Protocol need not prevent us from co-operating in the context of the US NZ Climate Change Partnership or even in the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate to which both Kyoto and non Kyoto signatories belong.

Differing views on nuclear propulsion need not detract from both countries' working together to shut down a nuclear reactor in Russia or to contain the threat posed to regional security by recent North Korean missile tests.

Differing approaches to agricultural subsidies need not prevent us from working together to rid the world of these disastrous practices in the context of the WTO's Doha negotiations.

Mr Peters' proven ability to pull a rabbit out the hat should not be underestimated but we should not expect big headlines from this visit.

This time round it is the further strengthening of the relationship that is the deliverable.

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