

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating referred to the Australian intelligence agencies as “nutters”.

In interview given to Australia’s ABC network former Prime Minister Paul Keating referred to the Australian intelligence agencies as “nutters”.

The comment was in the context of the advice that those intelligence agencies were giving the government on relations with China, Australia’s most important economic partner by a considerable margin.

There were the usual expected expressions of outrage from several quarters, and Labor leader Bill Shorten hurriedly confirmed his faith in the said agencies, his good relationship with them, and the value he attached to their advice.

It was perhaps too much to expect during an election campaign, one currently devoid of appearances by the Foreign and Defence Ministers, that Mr Keating’s remarks might be discussed beyond his colourful adjectives as to the state of their alleged sanity or lack thereof.

The absence of such a discussion is greatly to be regretted because there have been a number of events in the world of strategic significance to Australia and repercussions within Australia since the election date was announced last month, almost none of which have received any significant media coverage, let alone discussion and analysis.

A number of European elections and political events in Europe this year have seen the rise of right-wing political parties, either gaining power or significant increases in their political representation in their parliaments. This is mirrored in Australia. The European Union

At least in Australia there seems little appreciation of why this phenomenon is occurring. Not the least of the reasons is that in economic terms, the income inequality gap is at levels unprecedented in modern times. This trend has accelerated since the global financial crisis of 2008 and has not been seriously addressed by mainstream political parties. Instead, tax cuts are proposed for those on higher incomes, and the long discredited trickle-down theory of wealth redistribution is still parroted.

The second great impetus to popular discontent has been the manifest disparity between the rhetoric of the liberal rules based international order and the objective reality.

Australia’s “joined at the hip” ally, the United States, is increasingly seen by the vast majority of the world’s nations as a lawless bully that unhesitatingly abandons commitments that it itself made because of an overarching presumption that it is entitled to change or ignore rules in its own perceived self-interest.

This year alone, and we are not yet halfway through, the United States has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel; approved Israel’s annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights; imposed sanctions on a range of countries pursuing their legitimate interests; attempted a coup d’état in Venezuela and threatened that country that “all options are on the table”; unilaterally abandoned the JCPOA that it was a party to the negotiations on, and approved in the United Nations Security Council less than four years ago; abandoned the antiballistic missile treaty; dispatched a carrier task force to the Persian Gulf “as a message to Iran”; described (by the US

Ambassador to Russia) another carrier task force in the waters adjoining Russia “as 100,000 tonnes of diplomacy”; and imposed swinging tariffs on Chinese imports; to cite but a few examples.

All of these actions strike at the heart of the notion of a “rules based international order” unless one defines such a term as ‘our rules that we are free to change or ignore as we see fit’.

As recently as this week United States Secretary of State Pompeo threatened to sever intelligence sharing with the United Kingdom if it persisted with its intention to allow Huawei to participate in the United Kingdom’s digital updating. Australia has already succumbed to United States “advice” that Huawei represented a “national security threat.”

Huawei has denied there its 5G technology is a digital backdoor for spying. Those denials may or may not be true, but it is completely dishonest to advance that as a reason when we have known, thanks to Edward Snowden, the existing American technology enables precisely that and has done so for a number of years.

It is also dishonest to criticize China for alleged cyber spying when Australia’s Pine Gap fulfills precisely that function on behalf of the United States. As with American opposition to the Nord Stream 2 project where it wishes to replace Russian gas with its own LNG at three times the price, so too does the US wish to replace Huawei with its own inferior indigenous technology.

The recent BRI Forum in Beijing, attended by more than 5000 delegates from 150 countries all eager to learn more about, and consolidate their participation in, the world’s greatest infrastructure and development program, is further confirmation that the vast majority of the worlds’ nations are rejecting the United States and its allies’ zero sum mentality which allows only one winner.

The era of the unipolar hegemon that has threatened, sanctioned, bombed, overthrown the governments of and invaded more than 70 nations in the post-World War II era is over. That state of affairs is in the midst of being reversed by the emergence of a multipolar world, spearheaded by Russia and China.

Mr Keating may have overstated his criticism that the intelligence agencies are “nutters.” The profounder truth of his criticism, however, is that those agencies are dinosaurs from a different era.

The refusal of the United States and its allies like Australia to recognise that the world is changing, and that the true “nutters” are the US leadership that thinks it can bully, cajole and threaten others to get its way. These are the people that represent a very real danger to our peace and security.

Is it too much to hope that the last week of this incredibly banal election campaign will actually address these existential issues that are as much a threat as the effects of climate change reported in a major (and largely ignored) United Nations report. That report disclosed a rapid and ongoing extinction of millions of species on the planet. The challenge will be to ensure that the human species is not one of them. On present indications the symptoms are not encouraging.