

Action and results drive John Key more than rhetoric

24 November 2008

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The New Zealand Herald

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd have more than just blue and red parties in contrast. It is their style too.

That was evident from the press conference they held at the weekend at the first Apec for both of them.

It was very much Mr Rudd's show.

Mr Rudd referred throughout to Mr Key as John. Mr Key referred to Mr Rudd throughout as Prime Minister. Mr Rudd began with a three-minute dissertation on the healthy state of trans-tasman relations and the unhealthy state of the world economy.

Mr Key kept his preliminary remarks to 30 seconds.

Mr Rudd, who has been in power for a year, was assertive and smart alec. Mr Key who has been in power for less than a week, was passive and slightly gauche.

But despite Mr Rudd's obvious ease with diplomacy - he is a former diplomat - he has also given Mr Key a great example of how not to do international relations.

Mr Rudd's idea of an Asia Pacific community has been received sceptically, not least because of the way he launched it - as a new leader without having attended a single Apec.

It was seen as presumptuous as well as unnecessary.

Mr Key's style and New Zealand's position is such that he would never have done it that way.

And where Mr Rudd is holding to his goal of community in the face of what amounts to a loss, Mr Key can be delighted at a couple of Apec achievements in terms of New Zealand's trade agenda. The decision of three more countries - the United States, Australia and Peru - to join the Transpac free trade agreement formerly known as P4 is a significant win for New Zealand and Singapore, which started talking about it six years ago.

The fact that United States Trade Representative Susan Schwab said it was likely to receive backing from the Obama Administration was a fillip.

And the kick in the backside that the G20 and Apec have given to get the Doha Round back on track by the end of the year is also what New Zealand wanted, the multilateral route to free trade being New Zealand's priority.

A big disappointment for Mr Key was the cancelling by China of the planned bilateral breakfast meeting with President Hu Jintao because of more pressing demands on his time, though the Prime Minister has been invited to China.

The other two meetings New Zealand officials would have wanted Mr Key to have would have been with Taro Aso, the new Prime Minister of Japan, New Zealand's third-biggest trading partner, and President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea, which is considering doing a free trade agreement with New Zealand.

Meetings with them will almost certainly be sought in two weeks when Mr Key goes to the East Asia Summit in Thailand.

While Mr Key has acknowledged he has "big boots to fill" in following Helen Clark as New Zealand's representative on global issues, he has the attributes to do well in foreign relations.

He has long had a reputation for hoovering up knowledge and advice when he needs it, as he did from Helen Clark herself last week, putting NZ's interests rather than his pride first.

He inherited her speaking slot at the business CEO summit, where he did not distinguish himself with his oratory in a rather artless speech on the financial crisis but did so during questions on his knowledge of the systems.

In the bilateral meetings already held with Indonesia, Peru, Chile, Singapore and Australia, he is said to have absorbed the briefs quickly and advocated clearly.

And he is more attracted to action and results than to bluster and rhetoric. Two weeks after the election and less than one week as Prime Minister, that is more than evident.