

Too wide a Gulf for Carr

Australia's Foreign Minister has to learn to play the bluffing game in the Arab world, writes **BRUCE HAIGH**

Bob Carr has not learnt the difference between process and outcomes. Two Australian businessmen, Matthew Joyce and Marcus Lee, remain detained in Dubai. Carr can talk the leg off an iron pot, as he did last week with Fran Kelly on ABC Radio National, detailing all the many representations he claims the Australian government has made to the ruling regime in Dubai seeking the release of the two Australians, but the fact remains that two Australians are being held against their will in the city state.

An Australian court has found that neither committed a crime, but the authorities in Dubai refuse to recognise the validity of the court and its findings. For some reason or other Joyce and Lee have run foul of the ruling elite; expatriate businessmen can be fair game in the family-run countries of the Gulf. Mostly greasing palms will guide the way out of whatever maze they have wandered or been drawn into. Sometimes the stakes are higher and this seems to be the case with Joyce and Lee.

Carr and his representatives can make representations until the camels come home but if they have nothing on offer, negative or positive, Joyce and Lee will do the time that the local "aggrieved" party deems appropriate.

Two examples. Once upon a time I was a diplomatic representative in an Arabian country. Two expatriate nurses were picked up by local authorities for drinking, on New Year's Eve. They were each sentenced to 90 lashes. Yes, 90 lashes. One was an Australian and the other British. I was in charge of the embassy at the time. Representations were made but elicited nothing positive. I went to a senior British diplomat in their embassy and said we needed to break the impasse. A plan was formed.

We made a joint approach to the Foreign Ministry and said if you thought the publicity from the film *Death of a Princess* was bad you haven't seen anything. We undertook to approach every major newspaper in the West with the story and as cream on the cake, just by chance, the son of the ambassador of our host country had been picked up for drunken driving in Canberra. I undertook to pass that to Western journalists as well.

After a week or so the Foreign Ministry invited us back and said how did we see the matter resolving itself. We said, release

the nurses, give them back their passports and ensure that they receive all payments and entitlements from their employer and ensure that they caught a plane out of the country in 10 days. And that is what happened.

In the same country there were two courier companies; one was owned by Australian interests, the other by powerful local interests. The former was shut down by the local police for allegedly carrying drugs. The Australian principals contacted the Australian embassy and said it was highly unlikely that drugs had been carried by them because of measures they had in place with respect to customers and staff.

Once again I was acting in charge. I went to American and British counterparts to see if they could throw any light on the matter. Using different sources of intelligence they both came up with the same answer.

A powerful member of the ruling family wanted to take over the Australian courier company. He wanted a monopoly for his own courier company. A senior representative from the Australian company was contacted and advised to come to the Arabian country ostensibly to discuss terms and conditions of the "takeover".

A visa was issued for this purpose. On arrival he was fully briefed. He made an appointment, went to the Foreign Ministry in the company of an Australian diplomat and laid out all before them and said he would go public with the information. Within a short space of time the Australian-owned courier company was operating again and nothing more was said or became of the matter.

Bluff and counter-bluff. It helps to be a poker player when doing business or representing Australia overseas in certain countries.

Carr needs to speed his learning curve. If Joyce and Lee are to be released he will have to deal with the real world. His track record to date does not offer encouragement.

And the government of Dubai needs to be cognisant of the fact that their handling of this matter is being watched closely. The business world is not impressed and their ineptitude will soon come to affect investment decisions, not only in their country, but in other parts of the UAE and the Gulf.

■ Bruce Haigh is a political commentator and retired diplomat.