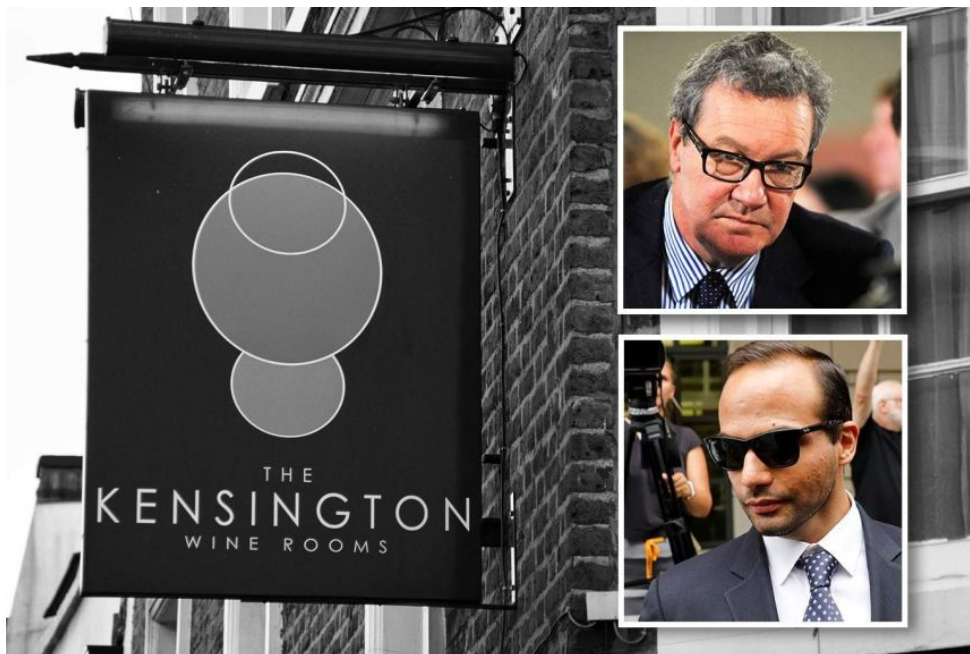


What happened when Trump campaign aide George Papadopoulos sat down with Australian diplomat Alexander Downer

By political editor [Andrew Probyn](#) and political reporter [Matthew Doran](#)

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Alexander Downer and George Papadopoulos met at the Kensington Wine Rooms in May 2016. (ABC News/AAP/Reuters)

An Australian foreign minister with the airs of antipodean aristocracy turns spy for his birth land, using a prized diplomatic posting to pursue oil and gas interests in the Mediterranean.

He's introduced to an ambitious American up-and-comer through a diplomatic aide with Israeli contacts, and learns of a Russian attempt to nobble a presidential aspirant.

They meet in an upmarket London wine bar that boasts 150 different varieties, but decide that gin and tonic is their tipple of choice.

No, it's not the blurb on the back of an airport lounge page-turner. It's the story being spruiked by a convicted liar about Australia's former high commissioner to the United Kingdom, Alexander Downer.

The real story — or as close to it as can be gleaned — is also intriguing, but the motives ascribed to what went on are far less calculating.

[George Papadopoulos, sentenced to 14 days' prison earlier this month for lying to the FBI's investigation](#) into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential campaign, has had plenty to say about Australia's former top diplomat in London.

He's suggested on Twitter that Downer is an operative of MI6, the British secret intelligence service, and that Downer's companion at drinks was a member of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service.

Their meeting at Kensington Wine Rooms in May 2016 has become practically folkloric. It triggered a series of events that is now the subject of the Robert Mueller investigation that began two months later.

So what did happen?

"Alexander Downer did not randomly reach out to me," Papadopoulos told conservative commentator Sean Hannity on his nationally syndicated radio show in the US this week.



George Papadopoulos was sentenced to 14 days' jail for lying to the FBI investigation.
(Reuters: Yuri Gripas)

That's agreed on by all parties. At least sort of.

Erika Thompson, a career diplomat working as a political counsellor at the commission, had a boyfriend called Christian Cantor, the head of the political branch in the Israeli embassy.

Papadopoulos also knew Cantor, describing him as someone "who just hated Trump, he hated his guts".

Australian sources describe Cantor, who is now engaged to Thompson, as a "liberal internationalist" who'd be no Trump fan.

"All of a sudden, [Cantor] decides one day to introduce me to his so-called girlfriend, who just happened to be an Australian intelligence officer and the assistant to Alexander Downer," Papadopoulos said.

Australian sources emphatically deny Thompson is an ASIS agent, but a "mainstream DFAT officer".

She asked Downer if he'd like to meet Papadopoulos, explaining he was known to Cantor and was part of the Donald Trump campaign.

Downer thought it wasn't a bad idea; Trump wasn't yet the Republican nominee for the United States presidency, but close to being, and there were things to be learnt about the potential president.

So they met at about 6:00pm on a Tuesday at the Church Street, Kensington wine bar chosen by Thompson. It was a mutually convenient venue; Downer lived south of Hyde Park, Thompson north.

The three of them had a gin and tonic, maybe two, over an hour.



Israeli political counsellor Christian Cantor (left) is now engaged to Australian Erika Thompson. (Supplied: *The Bow Group*)



Erika Thompson, political counsellor at the Australian High Commission in London. (Supplied: *RocketReach*)



The Kensington Wine Rooms was the location of the now-infamous meeting between then Australian high commissioner to the UK, Alexander Downer, and Trump campaign aide George Papadopoulos in 2016. (*ABC News: Lincoln Rothall*)

Trump describes Papadopoulos as an 'excellent guy'

The 28-year-old Papadopoulos was very friendly. But he seemed someone rather inexperienced to be a senior foreign affairs adviser to a presidential candidate.

Downer led the discussion. Papadopoulos was confident about Trump winning the nomination — but the Australians surmised that he would say that, being a "Trumponista".

Papadopoulos assured them that Trump wouldn't be an isolationist, as some had been warning. The American said Trump would be tough on trade when it came to China and Europe. This was good gear.

They talked about oil and gas. Trump had introduced Papadopoulos as "an energy and oil consultant, excellent guy" when he met The Washington Post's editorial board in March 2016, so the Australians knew it was a subject that might elicit chat.

Downer knew a fair bit about oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean, having been United Nations special adviser on Cyprus for six years from 2008, a period when Perth-based firm Woodside acquired a 30 per cent stake off the coast of Israel, which shares a maritime border with the island of Cyprus.



President Donald Trump tweeted a photo showing George Papadopoulos, left, at what is described as a national security meeting in March 2016. (*AP: Donald Trump Twitter*)

"Australian oil company, Woodside, was actively competing with American oil companies trying to do business in Israel and Cyprus," Papadopoulos tweeted on Thursday.

"I was advising American companies at the time. No wonder Downer wanted to talk oil in London and then began recording me with his phone. Set up."



The Australian side denies recording the conversation. Diplomacy isn't done that way, it was explained to the ABC.

It was all good intel, relayed back to Australia in a cable written by Thompson.

But it was what Papadopoulos had said about Russia, also detailed in the cable, that proved critical.

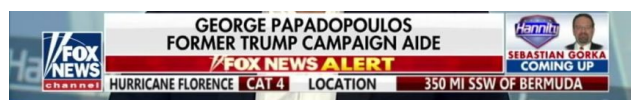
Downer had asked Papadopoulos about Trump's prospects, should he get to a general election, and the American was optimistic about his chances.



But then he would be, wouldn't he?

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He said the Russians might use some damaging material they had on Hillary Clinton, who was still some weeks from becoming the presumptive Democrat presidential nominee.



George Papadopoulos speaks to Fox News host Sean Hannity on September 11, 2018 about his interaction with Alexander Downer

"I have no recollection, whatsoever, talking about emails," Papadopoulos said this week, referring to a trove of Clinton and Democrat-related emails that had been stolen by Russian intelligence.

"I remember a lot about this meeting, and it was one of the most strange meetings I had in the campaign."

It's understood that Downer remembers no specific mention of emails either.



Alexander Downer is in London and has not been questioned by the Mueller inquiry. (AAP: Lukas Coch)

News spreads from London to Canberra and DC

But the cable came back to Canberra about an aide to Trump saying the Russians had some dirt on Hillary Clinton and were prepared to use it.

The Americans weren't informed immediately about what Papadopoulos had said to Downer, but when it became known that the FBI suspected a Russian hack of Clinton emails, the information was shared with the Five Eyes intelligence partner.

Cantor is now back in Jerusalem, working as a branch head in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thompson, now his fiancée, is on leave without pay from DFAT.

Downer is in London and has not been questioned by the Mueller inquiry. Some say it's very unlikely he ever will.

And Papadopoulos is still tweeting darkly, warning only yesterday that the British and Australian governments' "attempt to sabotage the Trump campaign" is about to backfire.

PODCAST



George Papadopoulos: The coffee boy

Papadopoulos is the first known link between the Trump campaign and Russia. Just how close was the so-called coffee boy to Russian spies offering dirt on Hillary Clinton?

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As for that 20-pound round of drinks shouted by Australian taxpayers at the Kensington Wine Rooms, it's now commemorated by a blue plaque.



A sign outside the Kensington Wine Rooms, mimicking the blue plaques placed around the city at notable locations. (ABC News: Lincoln Rothall)

Got a news tip? Get in touch with [Andrew Probyn](#) or [Matthew Doran](#) via email or Twitter ([@andrewprobyn](#) and [@MattDoran91](#)).