

Malcolm Turnbull shrugs off suggestions he is facing an internal insurgency

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The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, says he has a cordial relationship with Tony Abbott, the man he deposed, and dismisses suggestions that Abbott is running an insurgency against him.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: The Prime Minister is flying overseas again tonight. The centrepiece of his trip will be the climate change summit in Paris next week. It comes of course against the backdrop of global tensions about terrorism and security, while at home, the Prime Minister's ascension is still fuelling resentment among some of his colleagues. Earlier today, Prime Minister Turnbull joined me from his office in Parliament House.

Prime Minister, thank you for your time.

MALCOLM TURNBULL, PRIME MINISTER: Great to be with you, Leigh.

LEIGH SALES: Let's start with national security. You said earlier this week that Islamic State was weak. If that's true, then why is the might of the US and its allies so far unable to defeat it?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I said it was weak relative to other powers. It is surrounded by enemies. It is under siege from the air. But of course, it is able to occupy territory, the territory that it has, although its boundaries are being pushed back, both on the Iraqi side and on the Syrian side, and of course it is able to direct or at least sponsor acts of terrorism abroad.

LEIGH SALES: So weak's an understatement, isn't it?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: No, I was talking about relative strength. It is weak relative to the strength of the United States, for example, or Australia.

LEIGH SALES: But then you say that its boundaries are being pushed back and that it's under siege, yet Michael Keenan's said today that Australia's now facing the most significant ongoing threat from terrorism that we've seen in our nation's history.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, that's - that is true. There is a - this is the - we - as a nation, we've had limited experience from terrorism domestically. Of course, you know, Australians have been victims of terrorist attacks overseas, most notably and tragically in Bali, as we all recall with great sadness. But what we've seen in very recent times is an increase in terrorist incidents in Australia and they have been, as I said, sponsored by or the perpetrators have claimed a connection with ISIL.

LEIGH SALES: Billions of dollars have been spent since 9/11, numerous civil liberties have been curtailed. Australians have been told the whole way along that it was to make them safer and to defeat terrorism around the world. And yet, here we are in 2015, told today that we're less safe than we've ever been. Don't Australians have a right to feel a bit let down by the policy decisions that have been

made since 9/11?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well Leigh, I think we have to be - we have to be very calm and cool and clear-eyed about this. We cannot eliminate entirely the risk of terrorism or a terrorist incident any more than we can eliminate entirely the risk of any other crime. So the challenge for the security agencies is to be able to thwart, interrupt, prevent terrorist incidents, to maintain highly effective intelligence operations so that they can - they're forewarned. And of course we need to be - in the event of a terrorist incident occurring, we need to be able to respond quickly and decisively.

LEIGH SALES: Yet it seems that since 9/11, things have trended in the wrong direction because now we're told we're less safe than ever.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, Leigh, I'm not sure that's a fair - fair comment. There has been - there have been more terrorist incidents in Australia in recent times - that is true. But we haven't, at least to date, had a mass casualty incident of the scale of Paris or the tragic events in Paris or indeed of 9/11 on Australian soil.

LEIGH SALES: In your national security statement earlier this week, you said that in terms of trying to defeat IS in Syria, this is not the time for machismo. At whom or what was that remark directed?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, I was really referring to the point that we have to be - look, if you go back a little bit earlier in the speech, perhaps this is the key to the point I was making. I said that we should grieve and we should be angry, but we should not let grief or anger cloud our judgment. So this is not a time for gestures or bravado or machismo - however you want to describe it. This is a time for a very cool and calculating and rational response to the problem and setting out the response that we will have, acting on the advice, as we are, of our security agencies, of the Chief of the Defence Force. That's what is a calm and measured, emphatic response as opposed to one that is informed by the very legitimate grief and anger. We have to be - we have to be very cool-headed and clear-eyed.

LEIGH SALES: Is an example of machismo the calls for there to be boots on the ground, for example?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: I wouldn't describe - it depends what you mean. When people say boots on the ground - whose boots and on which ground? This is the thing. If - there have been people in the media, some commentators suggesting that Australia should take unilateral action in the Middle East. Now, the simple reality is this: we have, for example, 90 special forces soldiers, servicemen and women, in Iraq. They have the permission of our government to accompany Iraqi counterterrorism forces outside their base up to the headquarters level. But the Iraqi Government does not want to have Western soldiers being out in the field, so that is why they are staying in their base. So if people say we should have Australian military boots on the ground in Iraq, they overlook the fact that Iraq is a sovereign state and it determines what Western or other forces, foreign forces, are active within its borders.

LEIGH SALES: Let's turn to the economy. The Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said this week that you've not been subjected yet to any real economic test and that the real test will come with the next budget when you outline what you intend to do. He's right about that, isn't he?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well the budget is an annual test, I suppose, but the - we will release, within the next two weeks, an innovation statement that will set out a very large number of substantial measures to drive the innovation that will ensure that Australians, their children and grandchildren will have great jobs, better jobs in the future, that will drive our economy. I don't think anybody has any doubt that if we are to remain the high-wage generous social welfare net country, First World country that we want to be, then we need to be more innovative, more competitive, more productive and the innovation statement will be a good example of the measures the Government is undertaking

to achieve that.

LEIGH SALES: We know you're also thinking about what you might like to do on tax reform. You came into the job promising to not play the usual game of rule-in, rule-out. Let me ask if you're prepared to do away with another old game, which is the promise that when economic change comes, nobody will be worse off.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, I think ... (Laughs)

LEIGH SALES: Somebody's always worse off, aren't they?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, well, it may - Leigh, I think the - I think the way you've got to look at any economic reform is whether it is equitable right across the community. The object - and of course, many, many - everyone is situated somewhat differently. Someone asked me: what is fair? There are libraries filled with books about: what is fairness? What is fair is basically a set of measures that are consistent with our commitment to a more competitive, productive, innovative society and are also consistent with Australia's strong, egalitarian, fair-go culture.

LEIGH SALES: And sometimes to make things fair though - sometimes to make things fair though, some people have to miss out so other people can pick up.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I think the - I think if you - for example, if you had a - changes that resulted in perhaps people on higher incomes bearing a - paying - bearing a higher burden - I mean, some people - I'm not saying this is our policy, but for example, many people have advocated that there should be some changes to superannuation so that it is - if you like, the tax concession is less generous to people on very high incomes or high incomes. I suppose that would be seen by many people as fair. But on the other hand, I suppose if you're one of the people who's getting less of a concession, you would - you might or might not feel it was fair or unfair. I mean, the - ultimately - ultimately, the proof of this pudding will be - of this whole exercise will be in the eating, in the outcome and the question is whether the whole outcome is seen to be equitable and that is our absolute objective. It will be a fair set of reforms, ...

LEIGH SALES: OK ...

MALCOLM TURNBULL: because, Leigh, if it's not fair - if I just may finish, if you don't mind. If it's not fair, it won't get the public support that it needs to be successful, so, fairness is absolutely critical.

LEIGH SALES: Alright. After Question Time, you head overseas and you'll attend the climate change talks in Paris next week. Given the tense relationships at the moment between world powers, the US and China over the South China Sea, the US and Russia over just about everything, Europe, all the nations within Europe over refugees and the economy, isn't the reality against that backdrop that it's gonna be very hard to get global agreement on something as contentious as climate change policy?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I think you've - I think there's a - I've just been to the G20 and also to APEC and the East Asia Summit, but at G20 where you had the 20 largest economies, naturally, climate change was a big issue. And I would say there was a - the views around the table were as close to unanimous as you could imagine. Everyone is committed to achieving a good outcome in Paris.

LEIGH SALES: So you're optimistic about the prospect of an agreement next week?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: I am optimistic and I notice that the French President, who is the host and the French Government, to their credit, have put enormous effort into seeking to ensure Paris is a success, the French President is very optimistic. And, you know, you know, you mentioned America and China and the South China Sea. Yes, there are - there are issues between the United States and

China over atoll-building and island-building in the South China Sea, as there is in fact in some senses greater issues between China and the various countries that are Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and so forth that are the neighbouring countries to the South China Sea. But that's one issue. The overall - all of those countries have much more in common. Their agendas are much more united than those single points, no matter how important, of difference. It's a mistake, if I may say so, to focus solely on the points of difference. Obviously, it's - in a sense, it's more interesting, it's more newsworthy, but it fails to capture the remarkable degree of unanimity and common purpose in the global community.

LEIGH SALES: Alright. Let's whip through a couple of other quick things before we run out of time. Two of your senators, Eric Abetz and Cory Bernardi, crossed the floor today to vote against a bill on student services fees. Do you have full control of the right wing of your party?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, the - as you know, there is a long tradition in the Liberal Party of people, backbenchers of course, being able to cross the floor. And that has - that has happened. That's always happened. When I was a backbencher, I crossed the floor on one memorable occasion. Philip Ruddock, a very distinguished elder statesmen of our party, has crossed the floor on more than one occasion. So, in the Labor Party, if you cross the floor, they chuck you out of the Labor Party. In our party, that's not the case. So - so we are a party of freedom.

LEIGH SALES: Is Tony Abbott leading an insurgency against you?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: (Laughs) Of course not, of course not.

LEIGH SALES: Well how do you intend to manage the detractors within your party? We've had a number of people in recent weeks publicly speak out against positions that you've taken.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I haven't noticed that. I mean, I've ...

LEIGH SALES: Well, Kevin Andrews, for example.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I've noticed - well I wouldn't interpret those remarks in that way at all. People are entitled - look, if you're going back to the security situation in Syria, people are entitled to express the view that there should be a large Western military force, boots on the ground. They're entitled to express that view. But that's an opinion. Now the fact is, it is not for us, for Australians to commit the armed forces of the United States to combat. The position of the American President is very clear. He does not believe that a large Western force intervening into that theatre would be productive. That's also the view, I might say, of every other leader with whom I discussed the Syrian situation at the G20. So that is ...

LEIGH SALES: So if you think that it's simply a legitimate expression of differing point of views, you don't concede that you have an element of discontent within your own ranks that you need to manage?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, Leigh, the leadership - if you're leader of a political party, you're leading a team of talented individuals. Anyone who gets into this place, whether they are a member of the House or a senator, is a remarkable individual. Not many people - not many people over the whole history of our Commonwealth have been elected to Parliament. So they're all remarkable individuals and they've all got an enormous amount to contribute and my job as leader is to draw on all of that ability and I seek to do so

LEIGH SALES: And have you spoken to Tony Abbott beyond an exchange of text messages, to which one of you referred a few weeks back?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Yes, I have - I have had a good chat with Tony, yes. Look, Tony and I

obviously have had some differences at different times, but we've known each other for a very long time and we have been and always will be able to have a very cordial discussion.

LEIGH SALES: The reality is also that you're not a new government. You are an extension and a continuation of the Abbott Government. When voters come to weigh up their vote at the next election, do they need to be making a judgment on the overall performance of the Abbott-Turnbull Government as opposed to just your talk of the future?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well I'm sure that voters will make their own decision based on a number of factors and I think they will assess the Government - the Government's record, they'll assess the Government's promises, what - the Government's vision, they'll assess the capability and competence of the Government to govern.

LEIGH SALES: Is it tricky for you to campaign on the record, given that you did feel the need to replace Tony Abbott?

MALCOLM TURNBULL: It is - I'm very comfortable in my role and I'm looking forward to an election next year when we will present our vision and our capacity to deliver a strong, innovative economy, an economy with great jobs and a generous social welfare safety net, an Australia that is as enterprising and productive as it is fair. I'm very confident of presenting that vision and that capability to the Australian people against Labor's alternative.

LEIGH SALES: Prime Minister, thank you very much for making time to speak to us today.

MALCOLM TURNBULL: Thank you very much, Leigh.