

## Andrew Bolt: PM Malcolm Turnbull must channel his inner Abbott

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Turnbull 'utterly undistracted' by Abbott1:43



Malcolm Turnbull says he is not distracted by comments made by Tony Abbott in the lead up to the election.

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a day ago

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[PM income tax switch 'muddle' could hide hidden agenda](#)

WHAT a disaster. At moments like this, Malcolm Turnbull must surely be asking himself What Would Abbott Do?

If not, he should, because at this rate he'll be toast.

I mean, when did you last see a prime minister act with such sustained ineptitude as Turnbull did over 48 hours last week?

It was so bad, and so typically Turnbull, that Liberal MPs must feel sick, especially the 53 who voted to make this bloke PM six months ago.

Turnbull, himself, seemed so rattled by the end that he gave three press conferences in a row where he read from notes, apparently not trusting himself to freewheel any more. No wonder.

On Wednesday, he announced he had a plan for "the most fundamental reform to the Federation in generations" — a plan that was "important", a "very big fundamental reform" and "a real opportunity", to which he'd had "very positive feedback", filling him with "optimism".

This plan was to let the states raise their own income tax, which — oops — might mean you ended up paying more tax overall. And — oh, dear — would benefit taxpayers in no clear way Turnbull could name.

Emphasising this shambolism, Turnbull outlined this while visiting a rugby league ground, as if he'd just thought of it.

Indeed, he hadn't discussed his plan in any detail with the premiers and, when he finally met them on Friday, gave them no formal paperwork to explain it.

Not surprisingly, there was no trace of that "very positive feedback" Turnbull had claimed to detect. As he later admitted, his great plan was actually "not acceptable" to the premiers and was therefore "withdrawn".

The one good thing Turnbull got out of this mess was the argument he made only after the event: that the states had turned down the chance to raise taxes to spend more on schools and hospitals, so why should he do it for them? Time to spend only what we had. Good point.

All this may seem just insider stuff, but it eats at Turnbull's confidence, at his colleagues' trust and at the media's fast-vanishing goodwill, leaving him with less heart, authority and freedom to propose the tough reforms we need.

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Turnbull has already dropped so many other plans he told us were important. Remember how he was going to raise the GST? Cut personal income taxes? Fix bracket creep? Cut back on negative gearing and capital gains tax concessions? Forget it. All abandoned, strengthening suspicions that Turnbull is all talk and no follow-through, a kind of Liberal Kevin Rudd.

Worse for him is that although his plans are dropped, they've left the impression he wants to raise taxes. And you won't be wrong to think Turnbull wants more of your money, either. He hasn't seemed to have got the memo from Treasurer Scott Morrison that there is "a spending problem, not a revenue problem".

Instead, in the past four months, Turnbull has announced another \$1 billion to allegedly help poorer nations cope with climate change, \$1.1 billion for an innovation statement that disappeared without trace, \$1 billion to fight hepatitis C, \$1 billion for a clean energy fund wanted by the Greens and, last week, yet another \$2.9 billion to the states for extra health spending.

The trouble is that every dollar involves borrowed money. Next month's Budget is tipped to post another huge deficit, this time around \$37 billion, with gross debt already reaching \$420 billion.

Of course, Labor is bound to be far worse. Turnbull correctly argued yesterday that the Gillard Labor government's reckless promise to spend another \$80 billion on health and on education (the so-called Gonski "reforms") were wildly unaffordable — fake promises to be paid for with make-believe money. Labor leader Bill Shorten, though, still pretends we can afford them. Be very scared.

But here's the problem. Turnbull now cannot afford another bold announcement about reform, making spending match income, having crashed so often already.

Nor, with Labor now neck-and-neck in the polls, will he have the courage to even talk about spending cuts, for instance. So what can he do?

My tip? Learn from the man he assassinated six months ago, calling on a coup before the Canning by-election could confirm Abbott's re-election strategy was starting to work.

1. Hire Peta Credlin as chief of staff.

All right, Abbott's ex-COS can't return, having been vilified by Turnbull backers as some power-crazed control freak with a suspiciously intense relationship with her boss (wink wink). But now we see what an office without such a hard boss looks like: ministers contradicting each other and even the PM on everything from Budget timing to whether taxes will go up, down, or nowhere.

2. More slogans, but with content.

Abbott's slogans — "stop the boats", "axe the carbon tax" and "lower, simpler, fairer taxes" — were mocked by Turnbull and the media, and Turnbull vowed they'd go. But those slogans left voters in no doubt what Abbott would do and left his team in no doubt they must be done.

In contrast, Turnbull's slogans — "continuity with change", "agile", "innovative" and "the most exciting time to be an Australian" — promise no action at all. If Turnbull cannot sum up his program in a slogan, that suggests he doesn't actually have one. And isn't that the truth?

3. Attack the Opposition.

Turnbull claimed Abbott was too negative, but now Labor is getting a pass. Rather than draw a clear line between low tax-Liberal and high-tax Labor, Turnbull gives the impression he's after voters' wallets, too.

4. Attack the green agenda.

Abbott's greatest success was to attack Labor's carbon tax and savage it for being the puppet of the fundamentalist Greens who helped make the Gillard government a disaster.

But Turnbull is muting that attack. He's given the Greens a \$1 billion new clean energy fund, and spent more on global warming schemes. He's also stopped attacking Labor's disastrous plan to bring back another kind of carbon tax, which Abbott would have used to destroy it.

Turnbull will hate to hear this. His pride is too great and his politics too different, but he must stick to Abbott's playbook or risk losing the unlosable election.

There were signs of adjustments in Turnbull's interview on Sky News yesterday. He was much clearer in attacking Labor's spending, more scathing of Gillard's unfunded promises on health, and more direct in warning Labor would raise taxes.

It was a start in channelling his inner Abbott, if that exists, but more is needed because here is the humiliating truth: Abbott was a better campaigner and political strategist.

Turnbull must now learn from Abbott or die.