

Malcolm Turnbull takes on Bill Shorten and grievance politics



Malcolm Turnbull goes on the assault during question time.

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The row triggered this week by Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, denounced by his opponents as a racist and a bigot, became a metaphor for something bigger — a sign of the repositioning of Malcolm Turnbull and his willingness to assault Bill Shorten on character grounds.

The Turnbull dilemma was illuminated brilliantly on Thursday in parliament. The leader who hates running on negatives and wants recognition because of his intellect and policies finally surrendered to reality, launching a long pent-up personal assault on Shorten as a reckless leader unfit to be prime minister. Most of his ministers and backbenchers said a silent prayer of thanks. Malcolm, it seemed, might be joining the world of politics — but we shall see.

Grievance politics, consuming much of the Western world, is coming to Australia big time. The driving forces are irresistible. Shorten has exploited grievance with his populist politics throughout the year and the Coalition, with a progressive leader, is now making the inevitable but uncertain adjustment.

Turnbull, in fact, gave vent to a sentiment he has nursed since the 2016 campaign when Shorten, off the back of his “Medicare privatisation” push, came to the brink of deposing Turnbull on a populist crusade and, ever since, has run rings around the government, entrenching Labor with a 53-47 per cent poll lead with aggressive politics remarkable for the

government's refusal to lay a glove on him. Labor can hardly believe its luck. Dutton is one of the few ministers who can damage Labor. He runs a portfolio where Labor remains vulnerable and speaks with two voices — it claims a unity ticket with Turnbull on border protection but attacks the lifetime visa ban bill, failures on Nauru and Manus Island, and slowness on processing Syrian refugees.

Dutton is cut from John Howard's cloth. Aware that Labor must satisfy two conflicting groups, the inner city progressives and the mainstream, Dutton seeks to drive a wedge through Labor's hypocrisy on border protection. There is plenty more to come with Dutton's planned agenda for next year.

At the same time, this week saw the latest stage in Turnbull's repositioning, part-political, part-policy based, as he ferociously defended Dutton: witness in recent times his assault on Labor's 50 per cent renewables target, his public rejection of the progressive icon, Gillian Triggs, his support for an inquiry into the infamous section 18C, the lifetime visa ban bill and his tough Howard-like stance on border protection.

If Turnbull fell under a bus tomorrow, Tony Abbott would not become the successor. Turnbull has built bridges to the conservatives, notably Dutton and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, and they, in return, have become a bulwark of his leadership. Turnbull's support base as leader is not just the progressive wing but now extends into the conservative wing; witness Dutton, Cormann, Josh Frydenberg and Christian Porter, among others. There is no support for Abbott to return to cabinet.

This week Dutton had the overwhelming, if not universal, support of the partyroom. Shorten's blunder on Thursday was to overreach in his attack on Dutton, thereby provoking Turnbull into retaliation and infusing the Coalition with a rare enthusiasm based on two factors: that Turnbull wanted to fight Shorten and that the issue was a winner for most Coalition MPs in their seats.

There are several simmering messages for the nation from this week. The Trump effect and rising support for Hansonism means the Coalition will seek to protect its Right flank from serious voter defections that, if unchecked, could ruin Turnbull. The government, now convinced that Shorten has got away with delivering contradictory messages from immigration to the economy, has a new resolve to hold him to account, guaranteeing a more savage politics. And the conflict between mainstream and progressive Australia around borders, Islam and terrorism has reached a stage of ideological polarisation that is a danger in itself.

Dutton's initial comments on the Bolt program were provocative, notably the link he drew between the Fraser government's historic 1976 immigration policy blunder over the large-scale entry of Lebanese Muslims and the high number of second and third generation Lebanese Muslims now charged with terrorist related offences — 22 of out of the past 33 such people. Claims that Dutton was being "racist" or a "bigot" — made by some politicians and media — were nonsense. These points were not racism. Nor could they claim his facts were wrong. Both on Fraser's mistake, now documented in the 1976 cabinet papers with

the department at the time warning of the high risks involved, and on the terrorist charges, Dutton was correct.

Moreover, from the time he opened his mouth on Bolt's program, Dutton made clear he was not seeking to discredit an entire ethnic and religious group, either Sudanese or Lebanese, with the sins of a minority, telling Bolt that "clearly something has gone wrong" and that this "is a particular issue — but I think we need to put it into perspective in terms of what the rest of the community is doing by way of contribution". In parliament he was even more specific: "I am not going to allow people who are hardworking, who have done the right thing by this country, who have contributed, who have worked hard and who have educated their children, to be defined by those people doing the wrong thing."

Yet this was the exact charge laid against Dutton — by Shorten, by Labor, by the Greens and by the progressive media. This dishonesty triggered Turnbull's reaction. Dutton's comments were unwise and sure to aggravate the Lebanese Muslim community — not prudent for an immigration minister and there may be a price to pay. But the progressive reaction to Dutton was far worse. It was ideological, reckless and dishonest. Turnbull's criticism was correct.

The big picture point here is vital. In the end it didn't matter what Dutton said, what point or qualifications he made. The progressive view is that such issues cannot be raised. The assumption is that if Dutton — a tough border protection minister — raises them then it must be racism. In short, to raise them is to be a "racist" and a "bigot". These brandings are now standard in the progressive political armoury and social media and are thrown about to discredit or denounce people who don't subscribe to political correctness norms.

For instance, Greens senator Nick McKim said: "Just because something is fact doesn't mean it is reasonable or productive to talk about it." That's a revealing attitude for a politician supposed to be addressing national problems. McKim attacked Dutton, saying it was wrong for him to "visit the sins of the few on the many".

The philosophy of the progressive class in Australia for a generation — politicians, academics, media — is that every fact and sin about White Australia, indigenous injustice and establishment abuses revealing a racist or repressive history must be laid on the table of public affairs for continuous publicity and denigration, but when such issues do not suit the progressive agenda their attitude is the exact opposite — the past must be hidden, overlooked, kept secret. They are hypocrites, many of the purist form.

This is now driven by a more urgent political imperative. Labor and Greens cultivate the identity politics that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton espoused in the US with different results. Their activists expect these attacks. It is affirming to hear Dutton branded a racist; after all, he is stopping the asylum-seeker boats. It warms the progressive heart and confirms their beliefs.

The method when making an attack is to cast the net as wide as possible — accuse Dutton of betraying all migrants or all refugees or all Lebanese to maximise the extent of alienation. It becomes even more convenient when the progressive media makes this call. This mindset,

driven by electoral politics, is now ingrained in the system. It is the progressive reaction to the long post-Howard Tampa legacy, as maintained by Abbott, Scott Morrison, Turnbull and Dutton.

The Liberals, in turn, as Dutton demonstrated this week, are fixated in their view of Labor as unconvinced in its heart about border protection, as unable to talk openly about Islamist extremist ideology and as increasingly succumbing to the grip of identity politics. Such conservative faiths are deeply held and, when Labor offers confirming evidence, even progressives such as Turnbull become full paid-up members of the Howard club. It was, significantly, Shorten who initiated the row this week. He decided to challenge Dutton in parliament on Monday, asking him about the alleged mistake by Malcolm Fraser and seeking an apology from Dutton to — wait for it — “Australia’s hardworking migrant communities including, but not limited to, the Vietnamese community”. This is called casting the net of grievance as wide as possible.

Dutton replied: “I am not going to be misrepresented by this great fraud of Australian politics — I can assure you of that. I made the point last week that we do have concerns about elements within Australian society at the moment, in particular some of these people who have been involved in criminal activity — some of those people who have been involved in heading off to Syria and Iraq. I am not going to allow the rest of the community, in Sydney and Melbourne in particular, to be defined by those small elements who are besmirching the vast majority of people within their own communities. I am not going to allow that to happen.

“I will tell you what — where I see extremism, I will call it out. Where I see people breaking the Australian law, I will call it out. Where I see people doing harm to Australians, I will call it out. And I tell you what else I will call out, Mr Speaker: this weak Leader of the Opposition.”

When Shorten asked a follow-up question about the country Dutton had been referring to in his remarks about Fraser, the minister sent a clear message — our migration program was a success overall but it did contain failures and those failures had to be faced. Revealing the figure of 22 people from second and third generation Lebanese Muslim backgrounds who were facing changes, Dutton’s point was that this problem had to be confronted. “We are getting the balance right when it comes to the migration policy in this country,” Dutton said. “We have 18,750 people coming here under our refugee and humanitarian programs, we have a net migration figure of close to 200,000 and we are working on one of the best programs in the world to provide a second start in life for people — and we want them to do it in a safe society.” But where the program was not working, “we should own up to our mistakes, we should rectify the problems”. Dutton is determined on this approach.

Sound racist to you?

The attacks on Dutton over the Fraser agenda are extraordinary. Malcolm Fraser took many historic migration decisions, notably the intake of Indochinese refugees, a turning point in our history for which Fraser and his ministers will be forever praised. But his error over the relaxation of entry criteria in 1976 to take people from the Lebanese civil war has been widely recognised. Indeed, it was corrected by Fraser himself. The Fraser cabinet was told that altering the entry criteria meant many of the people involved were unskilled, illiterate,

had questionable character and standards of hygiene. The department issued serious warnings to ministers about their ability to integrate into Australia.

It would have been better if Dutton had not raised the “Lebanese concession” issue, unsurprisingly a sensitive issue among some Lebanese and counter-productive in terms of relations with the Lebanese Muslim community. He exposed himself to the accusation of linking this decision with today’s foreign fighters. The reality, however, is that the 1976 decision was a significant blunder in our immigration history and there is today a serious problem in the Lebanese Muslim community. The Fraser blunder is relevant because it shows the unintended consequences of getting migration policy wrong. The idea that, as a nation, we cannot discuss this is simply ludicrous.

Shorten pursued the issue again on Thursday in a prepared speech on counter-terrorism branding Dutton’s reference to the Fraser decision as “ignorant and insulting”. Accusing Dutton, he said: “Loud, lazy disrespect, wholesale labelling of entire communities for the actions of a tiny minority — aid and abet the isolation and resentment that extremists prey upon.”

It is a serious charge but it is false. Dutton did not do this. It is, however, a classic demonstration of how the progressive side of politics cannot help itself — if given an opening it will accentuate the politics of grievance. This is the precise charge Turnbull laid against Shorten, saying he displayed a “recklessness and complete disregard for the truth” and, in the process, sought to “inflame unrest, animosity and racial hatred”.

This issue will not go away. Dutton intends to investigate the idea of a strong test for would-be citizens to avoid the situation we now face: Australian citizen jihadists fighting for Islamic State. Both sides are driven by electoral imperatives — yet the Coalition, as Turnbull knows, must not alienate ethnic communities, and Muslims and Labor, as Shorten knows, must not alienate the mainstream by refusing to concede these problems. As for Turnbull, only time will tell whether he crossed the Rubicon this week as a combat politician.