

EDITORIALS

Enough of the red faces and circuses: govern

The Australian, 12:00AM August 19, 2017 Even putting aside the theatrics — and they have been enough to put most thespians to shame — this has been a terrible week for Malcolm Turnbull's government. Tossed around like a tinny in an ocean storm, it has been incapable of steering its own course. Labor is questioning the government's legitimacy because three of its ministers have been revealed as dual citizens and are waiting for their eligibility even to sit in parliament to be decided by the High Court.

Last weekend on this page we noted that constant distractions of relatively minor issues highlighted "the seemingly entrenched dysfunction of our national political discourse". As we and, no doubt, the nation hoped for an improvement, no one could have imagined the farcical depths to which events in Canberra sank this week.

Perhaps there are aspects of the citizenship shambles that were difficult to avoid — Fiona Nash is particularly unlucky to be caught in citizenship by descent from a father she barely knew — but there are also elements of poor management. In the first instance, political parties should be alive to these issues given similar cases have arisen in recent decades and the Nationals, in particular, as a Coalition governing party are exposed as unprofessional in this regard. Still, even after these instances surfaced, the government's political management has exacerbated the controversy rather than quelled it.

There is no logical reason Matt Canavan should have been forced to resign from cabinet yet Barnaby Joyce and Senator Nash were not. This looks like Rafferty's rules and undermines the authority of none other than the Deputy Prime Minister, who is soon to be Acting Prime Minister when Malcolm Turnbull heads overseas.

Further, the hysterical claims from Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and the Prime Minister alleging a "conspiracy" by Labor to "collude" with its cousins across the ditch to "bring down" the government simply added fuel to a controversy the Coalition should have been trying to smother. Bill Shorten's obvious tactic was to create as much noise and chaos around these issues as possible to foster a sense of crisis and, surely to his pleasant surprise, the government became an ally in this process. We don't know who runs the Coalition's parliamentary and political tactics and the disturbing point is that it is not entirely clear it does either. Along the way the government managed to lose a procedural vote in the House of Representatives. This was Canberra returning to the theatre of the absurd we saw in the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd years.

Tantalisingly, it seemed at one stage that the government had negotiated a deal to deliver media reforms that were a decade overdue. Yet, true to form, they were held up again by haggling with the Senate crossbenchers. Defeat again was snatched from the jaws of victory. The outstanding issues need to be agreed with Nick Xenophon who — we are not making this up — yesterday became the seventh parliamentarian whose possible dual citizenship could see him disqualified from parliament. It often has been observed that making laws is much like making sausages because it is best not to see the process — to extend that analogy for this parliament you would have to liken it to that ABC television expose of Indonesian slaughterhouses.

In such a climate why would we not expect Pauline Hanson to don a full burka and take her seat in the Senate? Her silly and disrespectful stunt saw Attorney-General George Brandis and others overreact, as if we should show the burka a respect it does not deserve and accord Islam an untouchable status that applies to no other religion. All the same, Senator Hanson deserved some rebuke and we will see whether Senator Brandis's emotional tirade has any side effect on her voting and negotiating intentions. It should not; issues should be considered on their merits.

The onus falls, as it should, on the government to restore order. Mr Turnbull claimed the prime ministership lamenting the lack of an economic narrative. He has yet to outline one and is running out of time, with preparations already under way for his third budget. There appears to be an absence of leadership on Capital Hill and the vacuum is being filled by sideshows. At a time of global instability and economic precariousness, we need solid, stable government in Canberra.