

INQUIRER

Coalition sends Shorten laughing all the way to the election



The Coalition's outlandish claims have handed Bill Shorten victory these past week.

Dennis Shanahan, The Australian, 12:00AM August 19, 2017

On Wednesday, Malcolm Turnbull sat in parliament ahead of question time with a piece of paper in his hands that clearly contained notes for a prime ministerial statement. Under siege over the citizenship debacle and Labor's attacks on the legitimacy of Barnaby Joyce's place in parliament, and with the fate of his government in doubt, the obvious thought was that the Prime Minister was going to try to switch the focus to national security.

There were reports that Australia's most wanted terrorist in Syria, Khaled Sharrouf, had been killed in an airstrike and it was a natural issue for Turnbull to discuss with the Australian people.

Instead, it was a statement on the Yarra City Council's decision to shift Australia Day celebrations from January 26. This was deemed a political masterstroke, to change the direction of politics and give Turnbull the chance to attack a trendy, politically correct council and appeal to national sentiment and patriotism while demonstrating his conservatism.



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Despite the normal courtesy extended to a leader of the opposition when a prime minister is going to speak on a momentous event, Bill Shorten was kept in the dark until a bit of chatter across the table on the floor of parliament.

What happened next was the epitome of the Coalition’s lack of political instinct, its inability to pick a topic that resonates with the public and continuing miscalculation on how to damage the Labor leader. Shorten may not stand for much — he’s opportunistic, populist and emotive — but through a combination of providing slivers of wider policies and an ability to flip arguments to his advantage he has kept Labor ahead of the Coalition further and longer than any other Labor leader in the past 30 years.

When accused of “class warfare” and the “politics of envy”, Shorten responds that he’s about “fairness and equity”. When he’s accused of not having a sustainable economic plan, he says he is addressing “the problems of inequality” and defending “the underemployed, unrepresentative and underpaid”.

He changes definitions and demands “a better quality of life”, while alluding to widespread grievances about the cost of energy, education and housing without comprehensive answers. Yet he succeeds because the Coalition dawdled in its attacks on him and is now desperate.

Part of that desperation was that Turnbull’s attack on a city council was out of place in the federal parliament: it was confected outrage, lacked perspective and invited a response from Shorten in full glare of the television broadcast. It went nowhere for Turnbull, but gave Shorten the chance to declare his own support for January 26 as Australia Day and to end with a rallying call for a republic and an Australian head of state.

In the scheme of things, the incident didn't make much difference as the citizenship crisis grew, further undermining the Coalition's hold on power and adding to the sense of chaos in parliament, ably assisted by Pauline Hanson's divisive stunt on wearing a burka in the Senate.

But the wider picture for Turnbull, the Coalition and Shorten was illustrative of the Coalition's political failure. The first failure of the Coalition in the past two years has been that it has not tried to "frame" Shorten, to build on the public's mistrust of him and launch mortal political offensives against him. Turnbull was reluctant to be seen to be aggressive and wanted a new direction.

Before the election last year, there was too much complacency about Shorten as Opposition Leader and a reluctance to go after him, despite the wealth of material about his dealings as head of the Australian Workers Union. Further revelations this week have not got the attention they deserve.

Shorten was underestimated as a campaigner and almost stole the election from Turnbull, who is still outraged at Shorten's "big lie" on privatising Medicare. Shorten's union background and character were almost untouched during the election campaign, although his unpopularity with voters is the best thing the Coalition has going for it.

As a result of this reluctance to go after Shorten, the past two weeks have seen the Coalition completely losing perspective and making such outlandish claims that it appears ridiculous and thus hands Shorten a victorious response.

This is the key to Shorten's success: as a Labor leader he may not have a position on much, but he has a reaction to everything.

Last week, Turnbull actually claimed that Shorten would be a criminal under new anti-corruption payment laws and this week Liberal deputy Julie Bishop said he was treasonous. Shorten may not be popular, he may be seen as a creature of the unions and having acted improperly when doling out union funds to Labor fronts and his own election campaign, but he simply isn't seen as a criminal who should be in prison.

Likewise, out of desperation, Turnbull and the Foreign Minister tried to switch the focus of the problem of dual citizenship from their own contradictory and shaky position to Labor's "collusion" and "conspiracy" with the New Zealand Labour Party to bring down the Australian government. Bishop's declaration that she would find it hard to work with a New Zealand Labour government was an overreach that made her look silly but, more important, allowed Labor to turn the argument, once more, back against the Coalition.

Like the attack on Yarra City Council, the attack on the potential New Zealand Labour government was totally out of perspective, despite some justification for complaint, and gave Shorten more fodder to taunt Turnbull and declare "we are watching, sadly, the disintegration of a Prime Minister".



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In parliament, Shorten demonstrated in one succinct speech — delivered to empty government benches but to crammed and ebullient Labor benches — just how the Coalition’s ineptitude has allowed him to turn every argument against it.

Demonstrating a confidence that the government lacks, Shorten went through every argument the Coalition has run against him and flipped it. He made the point that Turnbull, who had promised a different sort of politics, was reduced this week to suggesting the Opposition Leader should be jailed and was in a treasonous plot with New Zealand. “When we see neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching on the streets of suburban United States, our Prime Minister is reduced to criticising a local council in Australia,” he said, laying on the sneer and ridicule that worked so effectively all week.

He then listed the complaints and grievances over school funding, TAFEs closing, apprenticeship numbers in decline, family violence and poor Aboriginal health. The government had nothing to say, Shorten said, to “families swamped by power prices” or young people “priced out of university and priced out of the housing market”. “When we say no to a plan to increase the tax burden for seven million Australians, they call it ‘the politics of envy.’”

Shorten said the government showed ignorance towards “the problems of inequality” and wouldn’t fight for wage rises or “young people who are being beaten at auctions by investors being subsidised by the taxpayer”.

It’s emotive and rhetorical, ignores that Labor’s own policies would push up energy prices, alludes to housing affordability policies that will have only a marginal affect at best and doesn’t suggest where the money is coming from, but it’s his answer to the Coalition’s inept political campaign.

That’s what Shorten is doing, and it’s working for Labor.

