

Power play: will the government's new energy policy finally silence Tony Abbott?

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As shut-downs go, it could not have been more emphatic. Environment and Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg had just presented to the Coalition party room details of the government's long-awaited energy policy. Flanked by government officials from the energy market regulators, his presentation, while lacking detail, was well-received.

Member after member rose to speak on the subject, and while there were some queries, no one was critical of the policy – no small feat considering the enormous heat and hot air that has engulfed the issue over the last decade. Then, towards the end of the three-hour meeting, Tony Abbott got to his feet. "He said, 'We need a longer time to talk about it as a political issue'," said one MP who was present. "He wanted to delay the decision, make it look like a more tortured process than it was. He wanted to have another meeting to have a political discussion."

What happened next is viewed by many within the government as a hopeful turning point for Malcolm Turnbull in his dealings with Abbott, who has sought to undermine and destabilise the Prime Minister over the issue of climate policy, among others.

"The PM slapped him down," said the MP. "He said, 'We are having a political discussion about it. We have a sensible policy'." Says a minister present: "Tony is a normally a very persistent guy. He just got completely closed down. Turnbull is usually quite accommodating but he was firm with Abbott. The room was with him."

The room was so wholly with the Prime Minister that applause erupted once he put Abbott in his place. "It was an indication of where the relative support is," says the minister. I know I'm frequently being told by the media that things we are trying to achieve can't be achieved, but we've got a track record of getting things through the Senate

Tuesday's party room meeting came after months of speculation over the Coalition's energy policy, and it followed a concerted campaign from Abbott and his supporters to walk away from the clean energy target, which would have subsidised "clean" energy sources beyond 2030.

The new policy will obligate energy companies to source some electricity from reliable or dispatchable sources, including coal, as well mandate them to guarantee emissions reductions. Turnbull said the policy would bring lower energy bills for consumers, although at a projected-yet-unmodelled \$115 a year per household, to flow through sometime before 2030, it wasn't exactly a bold claim.

The Prime Minister also said the policy presented the opportunity to "end the climate wars".

Both assertions are untested, and there is considerable doubt over whether the policy will do enough to enable Australia to meet its emissions reductions targets over the long-term.

The policy's success is dependent on whether or not the states agree to it, and any price relief for consumers will be small, and won't kick in until 2020, at the earliest.

Frydenberg points out it has been well received by the energy companies, by business and by manufacturers, who face soaring electricity bills they say will cost jobs if there is no relief. Many independent commentators believe the policy represents progress. "I think this policy has the ability to be the circuit breaker for the effective integration of energy and climate policy, something that has been missing for the last decade," Frydenberg says. "This is a significant breakthrough because the conversation has now moved to the point where people accept the declining cost of renewables negates the need for subsidies. We have adopted a pro-market policy which gives maximum flexibility to the retailers."

Whether or not voters are convinced by Frydenberg's sell, he and the Prime Minister have cleared probably the greatest hurdle in delivering a successful emissions reductions policy in this country – they got it through the Coalition party room. But even if the Coalition stays united on the policy in the face of attempts by the Labor opposition to paint it as carbon-trading-by-stealth, will it be enough to silence Abbott?

Will Turnbull finally be able to gulp some clear air and convince voters he is worthy of re-election?

The latest Newspoll, out this week, had the Coalition trailing Labor by 46 to 54 per cent. Turnbull placed an albatross around his own neck when he cited the loss of "30 Newspolls in a row" as a reason to oust Abbott in September 2015. This week saw the publication of Turnbull's 21st consecutive "losing" Newspoll. Another number will not have escaped the Prime Minister's attention – he lost ground to Opposition Leader Bill Shorten as preferred prime minister. Turnbull now leads on that measure by 41 to 33 per cent, which is a narrowing from the previous result of 42 to 31 per cent.

How much of this lack of traction can be blamed on Abbott? Since the former prime minister made his pledge of "no wrecking, no undermining and no sniping" on losing the leadership to Turnbull in 2015, Abbott has used several issues to destabilise the Prime Minister. The member for Warringah has waged proxy wars over climate policy, the Liberal party preselection process, and same-sex marriage.

He dwells increasingly on the fringe. Aside from his small band of supporters, ministers and backbenchers alike speaking of him in tones of bemusement. "Who would be able to predict Tony?" says one minister. "He's clearly very unhappy. Time has not healed wounds for him and he's become disconnected from reality. "He wants the world to know he's a man in pain."

Unfavourable comparisons to Kevin Rudd, who famously undermined his successor Julia Gillard, are being made even by those closest to him, according to this MP.

Another says wearily: "I suspect Tony will just move to another front. He'll continue to do what he's been doing."

Right on cue, while Parliament was still digesting the scant detail of the Coalition's energy policy on Thursday, Abbott was announcing his next overseas jaunt. Having addressed a climate change sceptics' outfit in London last week (the Global Warming Policy Foundation), Abbott said he would soon be off to America to discuss the dangers of same-sex marriage with America's Alliance Defending Freedom, a group whose representatives have previously advocated for the recriminalisation of homosexuality.

The politics at play here are clear, says former Liberal leader John Hewson. Abbott, he believes, is now utterly unencumbered by either national or party interest. He is dedicated solely to the destruction of Turnbull, and to that end

he needs both issues and media attention. Climate change - and attendant energy policy - has long been a favourite, but the actual issue at hand is irrelevant, says Hewson. "He has had more positions on climate change than you will find in the Kama Sutra."

Abbott's great political skill is simple and brutal opposition.

The Member for Warringah has used his opposition to market-based emissions reduction as a weapon to oust Turnbull from the Liberal leadership, and later, to destroy prime minister Julia Gillard (and arguably Kevin Rudd). But the energy wars that have dogged Australian politics for a decade, and that Abbott sought to prolong to damage Turnbull, could, after this week, peter out, particularly if the Labor opposition remains open to bipartisanship on Turnbull's national energy guarantee policy.

"[Abbott] tried to force Turnbull to agree to building a new coal-fired power station, but that would have been absurd and he failed," says Hewson.

So Abbott has turned back to his other drum, his opposition to same-sex marriage. But at the moment it appears that this issue will be consigned to history by the end of the year, much to the relief of the majority of Australians who are still locked in the debate foisted upon them by the Coalition's conservative wing, led by Abbott. Abbott, says Hewson, is running out of issues and out of credibility, and as a result he is beginning to appear faintly desperate. "That speech he did the other day about chucking goats into volcanos didn't do him any favours," says Hewson, referring to Abbott's address to the Global Warming Policy Foundation. There was a time, says Hewson, when Abbott could have made a reasonable case to his colleagues that he should be returned to the frontbench.

Given the damage he has done to the government, that time has passed, says Hewson, who names off the top of his head a tiny list of parliamentary Liberals who still voice support for Abbott. Hewson can't see Abbott either quitting Parliament or regaining higher office. Instead, with the debates on climate change and same-sex marriage over, he expects Abbott to continue to "howling from the backbench."

But in time, he says, it'll start to sound like a whine. Hewson expects Turnbull will reset his leadership in the new year, perhaps with more authority over the renegade former leader.

The Prime Minister is expected to re-shuffle his cabinet later this year or early next, once the significant hurdle of the High Court's citizenship decision has been cleared. The court's decision is expected imminently, with the judges' reasoning to be published later. So it is possible that within the next few weeks it will rule three of the government's ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, are ineligible for office.

This would prompt, among other things, a byelection in Joyce's seat of New England, and a possible no-confidence motion from Labor on the floor of Parliament – if they wanted to borrow from the Abbott book of opposition tactics. It's difficult to see how any discussion of policy – energy or otherwise – could break through the media storm that would cause.

On Thursday night, an energised Turnbull and Frydenberg had dinner together at The Lodge, and on Friday they travelled to a water treatment plant in Melbourne to begin the selling of their energy policy. "I know I'm frequently being told by the media that things we are trying to achieve can't be achieved, but we've got a track record of getting things through the Senate," the Prime Minister tells Fairfax Media. "This policy was widely welcomed across industry. This is being described as the best chance to get an effective policy framework." "I'm confident common sense will prevail."