

Energy policy: PM will get there in the end, but spare us the journey

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Winston Churchill once said that you could depend upon the Americans to do the right thing but only after they had exhausted every other possibility.

The same could be said of Malcolm Turnbull and the tortured path the government is taking in getting to a cogent and coherent energy policy.

The clean energy target for all intents and purposes is dead, buried and cremated. Yet Turnbull and his Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg are determined not to make such a proclamation until the end of the year. Why? In the belief that keeping the energy issue on the agenda for as long as possible will leverage the government maximum political advantage over Labor and its 50 per cent Renewable Energy Target.

But to properly execute such a strategy usually requires a government to know exactly where it intends to end up before it starts. Turnbull and Frydenberg clearly don't. The perception that they have allowed to fester since boldly promising to fix the micro-economic failures of state and territory governments is one of a complete and utter confusion.

It is becoming a feature of Turnbull's style of governing that he will, in the end, most often land at the right policy outcome but only after brutalising the process to get there and fatiguing the patience of his partyroom. Either Turnbull's initial instincts are too often wrong, or at least inconsistent with the conservative majority of his partyroom, or he takes virtue in exhausting all other possible outcomes, after rightly having listened to his colleagues. Whether the government finally lands an enduring energy policy that addresses foremost the fundamental issues of future supply and retail pricing is at least now the stated goal.

But in the meantime, the government continues to suffer politically over a chaotic process that has swung wildly since January. Having flown a kite over the idea that the government would build its own coal-fired power plant, Turnbull ultimately shot it down. As one of his colleagues pointed out, the PM did the same thing to Scott Morrison over the GST.

At the same time, ministers have been publicly road testing a climate change policy (clean energy target) and now seem intent on driving it off a bridge.

There was always going to be another, and not-unforeseeable consequence, of the delaying strategy. By creating a policy vacuum, the government left itself open to an internal campaign by conservatives who had every right to suspect Turnbull and Frydenberg were sympathetic to a CET.

The miscarriage of process and strategy arguably began with the commissioning of the Finkel report in the first place. Inevitably it left the door open for Tony Abbott to take up residence in the energy/climate change space. When the government does finally dump the CET, Abbott will doubtless be there congratulating them for finally listening to him.