

Policy to merely ‘keep the lights on’ is dim

Terry Mccrann, The Australian, 12:00AM October 21, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull and Josh Frydenberg have made a deliberate decision to lose the next election and to lose it badly. The rest of the joint party room voted to endorse the decision, an indeterminate number of Liberal and National members voting for an early retirement.

This is the irresistible and even more the irredeemable political consequence of the Turnbull-Frydenberg decision to opt for a policy of (only trying) “to keep the lights on” over a policy of significantly and quickly cutting both electricity and gas prices.

Far less, the third, but first-best, option — the option, begging to be embraced by a half-rational government that had the most minimalist understanding of political dynamics — of aggressively aiming to deliver both more and more reliable power and cheaper and sustainably cheaper power.

That is, further, to confront head-on, aggressively and repeatedly — day after day, non-stop and indeed a dozen times through every one of those days — the now prime minister-in-waiting Bill Shorten on his and Labor’s promise to turn the entire Australian continent into an even worse version of our contemporary attempt to vie with North Korea as the globe’s “blackest” geographic area as seen from space: Jay Weather-dill’s South Australia.

In sum and in short: the Turnbull-Frydenberg National Energy Guarantee, or NEG — did they really not worry about the awful similarity to Lenin’s NEP or New Economic Policy, or, depressingly, not even realise it — is dreadful policy and even worse politics.

The critical thing to understand is how both fundamental political necessity and spectacular political opportunity coalesce around the electricity debacle and increasingly inevitable disaster. To a lesser, but not that much lesser, extent, they also pivot on turning Tony Abbott from a negative into a positive, by bringing him back inside the tent.

As I’ve argued previously — and while it should be blindingly obvious, there is scant evidence that it has penetrated inside “the (Canberra) Beltway”, or indeed the broader “Beltway mindset” in Melbourne, Sydney or Brisbane —

the next election will be won or more probably (certainly?) lost by the government in Queensland.

The blinding obvious is that quite irrespective of what happens to the government's national vote — either first preference or two-party preferred — unless it wins most of Pauline Hanson's One Nation preferences in Queensland, it will lose the election.

The Coalition has allowed a fundamental asymmetry to seep into the political culture: that everyone must spurn Hanson. So that it's OK for Labor to swap preferences with the Greens, but it's improper for the Coalition to do that with Hanson.

Even though it is the Greens which are easily the more extreme, the more dangerous and dishonest, and when and if they get anywhere near actual government — I offer in indisputable evidence the de facto coalition with the Gillard government — they inflict real harm on Australians.

Now, after the utter misinterpretation of the consequences of the Barnett Liberal government swapping preferences with One Nation in the WA state election — and more potently, the distortion of its impact on the One Nation vote — Hanson is understandably, if incorrectly, running scared of doing it again.

It's much easier for her in a narrow branding sense to just “put the bastards, otherwise known as each individual incumbent, last,” as she intends to do in the forthcoming Queensland election.

If she also does it federally in 2019, the Turnbull government will lose the election — utterly unavoidably and undeniably, even if it has managed to achieve some miraculous (and impossible to see) recovery from its terminally parlous polling position. To state the further obvious: is the Prime Minister or his Queensland avatar senator George Brandis the person to win Hanson to their side? Even if they can even begin to understand the absolute necessity of doing so, and not holding-their-noses style?

One needs merely to note that while Brandis might be a legend of verbal flatulence in his own mind, Hanson and her 20 per cent-plus support in Queensland are the most striking consequences of his, for want of a better term, political intellect, instincts and actions.

That's the necessity, now the opportunity: power prices and power reliability. In other words, a campaign starting right now, to promise the "cheap, plentiful and reliable" electricity that we used to have in Australia, around an unashamed commitment to coal-fired baseload generation and the abandonment or at least progressive dismantling of fake (wind and solar) power.

Now, yes, as Henry Ergas correctly noted, the NEG went in that direction — so in a debating and even power delivery sense, it's better than the current position. But it does so inadequately and (politically) ineptly.

The government woke up to the reality that a 43 per cent clean energy target would be all-but indistinguishable to Labor's (insane) 50 per cent renewable energy target. But it then opted for something even more opaque. And, \$2 a week off your power bill, in 10 years, maybe, doesn't really seal the deal.

In 2013 candidate Abbott made it very clear: vote for me and "I'll axe the tax". And won, rather well. In 2019, candidate Turnbull needs Axe the Tax version 2.0. He and 24 million Australians also need it for policy rationality, but that's a different story.

Well, Abbott gave him the broad rudiments of what ATT2.0 could be, in his London speech. No-one could possibly deny that it would provide absolute clarity of differentiation from the even higher prices and inevitable blackouts, pervasively in all of the eastern states, that Shorten offers and indeed promises.

At a much simpler level, does Turnbull really want Abbott to stay outside the tent, inevitably micturating, LBJ-style, all the way to the election, or the 30th successive bad Newspann, whichever comes first?

Importantly, an inside-tent Abbott is also the only realistic pathway to harvesting those One Nation preferences, even if he was weaponised against the earlier Hanson.

Politics might make strange bedfellows. These are the ones Turnbull — and the rest of us — need.