

EDITORIALS

Possible by-elections just reinforce need for clarity

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The possibility of a by-election in the Sydney seat of Bennelong early in the new year changes everything and changes nothing for Malcolm Turnbull. It changes everything because a loss would rob the Coalition of its majority and place the government in mortal peril, forcing it to negotiate a minority arrangement to stay in power. And it changes nothing because it amplifies crucial imperatives that are constant for the Prime Minister.

Mr Turnbull desperately needs to create and convey an economic narrative, assert authority over the Coalition and nation, impose a solution on the energy policy crisis and explain why Labor's prescription of increased spending, higher taxes and deeper debt would be disastrous.

The dual citizenship pieces will fall where they will. Apart from trying to defend John Alexander's 9 per cent margin in Bennelong, the Liberals could be forced to defend other seats while Labor, too, might have some by-elections on its hands. Current polling would suggest any Labor seat is safe and any Coalition seat without a double-digit margin is in peril. But other factors could play a role, such as minor party and independent candidates. With or without a process to force public scrutiny, these cases will play out through exposure and judicial processes in the weeks and months ahead. So the answer for Mr Turnbull must be to finally do what he should have been doing all along: governing like his survival depended on it.

The Prime Minister has had close calls, warnings and exhortations before but has failed to take charge. His plan seems to have been one of tinkering and negotiating to massage what he can through parliament and weaken the points of difference between the Labor and Coalition agendas. Clearly it has not worked. To his right, Pauline Hanson's One Nation rises and Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives lure away Liberal voters. To his left, the Greens and Labor promise superficially attractive (but deeply risky) lines on climate and energy, border protection and budget repair. The Prime Minister's approach has had the look of neither fish nor fowl. He needs to provide clarity. As if he hasn't needed that certitude for most of the past two years, he will certainly need it now if he is to campaign for his life in Bennelong later this year or early next.

The dual citizenship shambles has not been of Mr Turnbull's making. But he has handled it poorly, not sensing the need to get out in front and assuage public concerns about a political class flouting the rules, or ensuring there were sufficient checks or reviews of his own partyroom members to clarify where they all stood. It seemed as if he were the last person in the country to realise action was required. All the while he failed to shift the focus on to other issues to provide some relief and sense of direction.

Mr Turnbull heads a party dismayed at its own performance and hemmed in by previous leadership shenanigans. Changing prime ministers echoed Labor's recklessness. So since he first seized the leadership even his enemies have been willing him to succeed. The stakes could hardly be higher or the time more pressing for Mr Turnbull finally to take charge.