

PM rejects calls for citizenship scrutiny0:38



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has dismissed calls for an audit of the citizenship of MPs in parliament. November 4th 2017, a day ago

The Turnbull government is in crisis



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DURING Julia Gillard's hung parliament, I would often look across at my counterpart in the government adviser's box during question time and wonder how he managed to get out of bed that day. Having read the newspapers - before dawn, I'd have a good idea how the latest calamity might unfold and knew that anything else they might have planned to say or do would be swamped by the newest leak or tawdry revelation.

Hit with one thing after another, it seemed they couldn't take a trick and even when it was not of their own making, Gillard's political management was chaotic and Labor was hostage to events.

How the tables have turned.

Now it is Bill Shorten's bloke, squaring off against Malcolm Turnbull's chief of staff (his third in just two years), who must be wondering how he got so lucky. Almost every week there's a new issue that throws the government off course and there doesn't seem to be anyone behind the scenes mopping things up or avoiding the problems in the first place. Even the most junior political player could have foreseen that spending months debating a clean energy target, only to dump it in the end, was poking an already angry conservative base in the eye. Or how the internal mismanagement of the same sex marriage issue stole months of oxygen.

Or how the citizenship debacle, if not taken charge of early, would cast doubt over all MPs and challenge the political system itself.



Malcolm Turnbull has been caught utterly flat-footed by the dual citizenship fiasco. (Pic: Tony McDonough/AAP)

Some of these problems should have been anticipated, they're what former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld might have called 'known unknowns'; those things you're hit with in politics that you know will come, like an entitlements scandal with one of your MPs, but you don't know who'll be involved, or when.

And then there's the 'unknown unknowns'; like the citizenship fiasco, a big hit that knocks a government for six and has everyone scrambling. I don't expect anyone in Turnbull's strategy team to have foreseen the loss of the two Green senators in July but it is beyond belief that since that time they haven't done

an urgent internal audit of all Coalition MPs to ascertain who in their ranks might be vulnerable and develop a contingency plan.

I'm sure there are one or two "rocket-scientists" inside the tent who have argued it is better not to know and hope they don't get found out (and it looks like that's the strategy they're following), but that is death by a thousand cuts. It also renders the Turnbull government, like Gillard's, hostage to events and unable to establish a narrative.

Most importantly, at a time when faith in politicians is at a dangerous low, it makes a mockery of the system that all Australians should rightly believe works for them, and in the national interest.

Right across the board, there is no political management inside the Turnbull government. Worse, the Prime Minister lacks judgment.

Nobody could have predicted the dual citizenship mess, which started with Greens senator Larissa Waters and soon became a flood affecting all parties. But the government should have had a plan by now. (Pic: Glenn Hunt/AAP)

As important as the Beersheba Commemoration was, faced with the High Court's decision and the loss of a Deputy Prime Minister, and that Deputy's deputy (Fiona Nash), Turnbull should have rejigged the program and sent the Governor-General. After all, that's what NZ did, and what better representative to send to a military event than Peter Cosgrove?

I don't use the word lightly — the Turnbull Government is in crisis.

I don't know what's worse — that they haven't done an internal audit so they have no way of knowing whether the government is even legitimate any more, or they have done an audit, and are sitting on any findings hoping the media will get sick of the issue and move on.

In his recent press conferences, Malcolm Turnbull has done his lawyerly best to make this issue seem complicated but it isn't that hard.

Get your birth certificate, work out where your parents were born, check your four grandparents as well and if it involves anywhere other than Australia, tell the foreign country in writing that, for the avoidance of doubt, you renounce any entitlement to citizenship. Then, and only then, nominate for parliament.

If you're in the parliament already and you didn't do these steps, you have questions to answer and should be referred to the High Court immediately.

The Constitution is clear and the recent decision by the full bench of the High Court was unanimous.

There's no amount of political spin that can make this go away so a smart government would take it head on and a smart PM would make transparency a virtue. If Malcolm Turnbull was actually in power, rather than just in office, he would have arrived back from Israel and announced a full audit and demonstrated leadership.

Yes, he might lose MPs when the results are known, but so would Labor, and while Shorten tries to protect his own, Malcolm Turnbull would have the advantage of finally starting to look like a leader, rather than someone who, in his own words, just says of the job, he's 'never had more fun'.

Sadly, it isn't much fun for the rest of us.

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