

## Make a noise and make it clear

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Malcolm Turnbull's excruciating week turned in on itself when, in the silliest political embarrassment of the year, he was criticised for not knowing the lyrics to John Farnham's anthemic *You're the Voice*. The Prime Minister was arm in arm with our songful swim team on the Gold Coast, missing the words to Farnham's party song and longing for the bagpipe solo. Next day on radio he sought to make amends. "Well, there's a good line in there for the Treasurer," he assured 3AW's Neil Mitchell, "ah, time to, um, what was it, time to, er, er, was it time, er, cripes, um, there's a bit about balancing the books." The intriguing coincidence for those frustrated by the Turnbull government is that inside those banal lyrics is a key to one of the Prime Minister's failings.

Hardly unexpected, the 30th losing Newspoll in succession was always going to provide an uncomfortable start to the week, predictably unleashing critics inside and outside his Coalition team. Former prime minister Tony Abbott and former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce provided dark theatre around the grim reality of the polling numbers. Yet, aside from increasing the rating of his media appearances, Mr Turnbull didn't seem to have a plan to change the subject, set the agenda or shift the debate on to his priorities. Once more he was buffeted by events, even forced on the defensive about this newspaper's reports that the government last year decided not to reduce immigration quotas. Seemingly in desperation, the Prime Minister accused us of peddling a "completely untrue" story; this flushed out more voices confirming we were, in fact, correct. Pointless stuff.

Especially when Farnham had the answers — "You're the voice, try and understand it, make a noise and make it clear." This is the most obvious and sound lesson the Prime Minister could take; as the leader of the government he possesses all the authority, tools and ammunition to set the agenda, direct the national conversation and advocate on the issues he chooses. Yet even this week, when he knew he would be under political pressure, Mr Turnbull failed to do that. He announced a series of infrastructure projects — the most notable being the Tullamarine rail link — that are useful joint ventures with the states, and which amount to governments getting on with what governments are supposed to do. But the Prime Minister gave us nothing further on the direction he wants to take us: on immigration, energy, industrial relations or economic reform.

Does he not know his powers? "We have the chance to turn the pages over, we can write what we want to write," he should have known. "With the power to be

powerful, believing we can make it better.” Instead, Mr Turnbull looked for that prosaic lost line for the Treasurer, which at least would have been an ode to fiscal repair: “We gotta make ends meet, before we get much older.”

Worryingly for the Coalition and the nation, we see a former prime minister setting the agenda. Mr Abbott spent the week on his bike and in the news, so that he could draw attention to his take on energy and immigration policy; he knows the power of his voice and how to use it. Just as one of his fatal flaws as prime minister was a refusal to promote Mr Turnbull, his successor is spooked by rivalries and leaves Mr Abbott on the Pollie Pedal instead of in cabinet. Not even for the common good do either of them ask: “How long can we look at each other down the barrel of a gun?”