

## Coalition can still win, but without Turnbull

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Last week I suggested that Tony Abbott had presented the government with a policy and political package that would in 2018 offer it the best chance of repeating the success of 2013. A critical aspect of the package was that it could be executed with or without Abbott — nothing in politics, not even fake sincerity, is copyright — although as I argued, the Prime Minister would be wise to bring Abbott back into the tent along with his package.

Well, the PM made it clear in a number of ways and on a number of fronts — most hysterically by his emphatic and dishonest rejection of this paper's Andrew Clennell's disclosure of Peter Dutton's proposed immigration cut — that he would have none of either. Neither Abbott nor the package *sans* Abbott.

The rejection was indirectly affirmed by Energy and Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg's speech to the National Press Club, aggressively selling his NEG or National Energy Guarantee.

We'll come back to the speech and the NEG, but first a fundamentally important point about Malcolm Turnbull's rejection.

Last week I argued that not only had the Canberra Press Gallery and the capital city "hate Abbott" commentators generally missed the 2013-like potency of Abbott's call to slash immigration and to cut power prices by recommitting to coal, they had consequently missed the second point: that Turnbull could embrace the package without necessarily embracing Abbott.

I would suggest that for essentially the same reasons — the denial of Abbott and even more his supposedly populist policy prescriptions — those same massed think-alikes have missed the single most important aspect of Turnbull's rejection.

What the PM has announced is that the government will only adopt an effective political and policy package — I would personally go further and describe it as the *only* package capable now of winning the election — over his dead (political) body.

Just to spell that out: this week Turnbull effectively announced to the entire coalition front and back bench: if you want to have any chance of winning the election and retaining your seats you are going to have to eject me from the leadership. Further, he did so while drawing specific attention to an alternative

to Abbott, as that alternative was signalling his willingness to run with some form of the Abbott package.

Dutton had already indicated a willingness to re-embrace coal; last week, thanks to Turnbull's "inspired" hysteria, he publicly added immigration. Turnbull has very neatly provided not one but two paths to political salvation for the Coalition. Both *sans* Turnbull.

This leads to some other critically important points to note about the PM's rush to emphasise his increasingly emphatic disposability.

The ticking clock is supposed to be Turnbull's ally. Even the "Christmas deadline" proffered by Barnaby Joyce is seen as being too late to change leaders. Well, in 1983 Labor did it the very day the election was called — and went on to win.

True, it did so in opposition, it wasn't assassinating a (if I can use the term a tad loosely) popularly-elected PM — indeed, the fourth such exercise in rather rapid succession.

But I would suggest the broader point is more relevant: the need to get a leader prepared to aggressively prosecute an election-winning campaign.

Further, the closer we get to the election, the less potent becomes Turnbull's threat to leave parliament, triggering a by-election for Wentworth that the government would almost certainly lose, along with its majority. Indeed, it would lose all its potency when it became functionally too late to leave.

In his speech Frydenberg set out to argue the inevitability of moving our electricity grid away from its coal base towards renewables but succeeded only in collapsing into incoherence and contradiction.

The one — presumably unintended — coherent message was that only coal could deliver lower power prices and supply certainty.

In short, in nailing his own political and policy colours to the PM's rejectionist mast, he actually — if unintentionally — broadcast its irrationality and political imbecility. And, like the PM, he further only succeeded in thoroughly mixing his messages.

Look at how we've moved away from coal, he exclaimed: in 2000 we got 90 per cent of our power from fossil fuels (mostly coal and some gas). Yet, after billions of dollars of investment — over the last five years more than 90 per cent of all generating investment — poured into renewables, and billions more

of direct and indirect subsidy, over the latest summer coal and gas's share dropped all the way to, wait for it, 82 per cent.

At one point in January, Frydenberg noted seemingly triumphantly, SA's wind turbines were operating at just 10 per cent of supposed capacity: the lights only stayed on, Frydenberg declared, thanks to power from Victoria's (wickedly brown) coal-fired stations. I could point him to times when SA got zero — yes *zero* — from all its turbines. Now Frydenberg wouldn't claim to be a mathematician, so perhaps he doesn't know that if you multiply zero by 100 or even one million you still have zero. If the wind ain't blowing in SA, even if the entire state had been covered in turbines you would still get zero electricity. Unless, perhaps, you'd erected them all on fields of Tesla batteries.

To Frydenberg and Turnbull, Abbott's proposal to compulsorily acquire Liddell and/or build a new government-owned coal station is supposed to be both "picking winners" and nationalisation.

But isn't the duo's demand that Liddell stay open beyond 2022 an indirect form of exactly both of those? Yet it lacks the coherence and cut-through political clarity of what a PM Abbott (or a PM Dutton) would do or promise to do.

And how is spending \$6 billion of government money to pump Snowy water uphill not — inefficiently — preferencing one form of generation over another and an exercise precisely in that nationalisation?

Most spectacular in Frydenberg's speech was the lack of self-awareness. He started by stating that not a day passed when he wasn't accosted by a complaint about power prices and then spent a few thousand words to say "tough". It's been a week of stunning if utterly unintentional clarity.