

Towards the 2016 Australian Election: From the Abbott to the Turnbull Coalition Governments

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Abstract

After winning the 2013 Australian national election, the conservative Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott struggled to maintain electoral popularity, as its policy agenda effectively stalled. This decline in political fortunes particularly came after the Abbott government broke its election campaign promises; it attempted to introduce harsh and inequitable fiscal austerity measures, including proposed cuts to health, welfare and education, which were frustrated by crossbench opposition in the Senate. Never a particularly popular figure, with an abrupt personality lacking sensitivity to the need for policy consultation, Abbott's personal approval ratings were long in steep decline, with the LNP remaining well behind the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in opinion polling.

Facing potential defeat in the next federal election due in 2016, amid a weakening economy and poor environmental policies, the Abbott Coalition government attempted to burnish its credentials through a tough public stance on national security, ranging from its completed promise to stop the arrival of asylum seeker boats, to firmer anti-terrorism measures, and increasing its role in the US-led war against Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East. However, as its unpopularity remained entrenched, Abbott was overthrown in a party room challenge, replaced as Prime Minister by the far more popular Malcolm Turnbull. Having already turned the Coalition's fortunes around, Turnbull is now likely to lead his government to victory in 2016.

Introduction

The Abbott Coalition government came to office largely as a result of the divisions and leadership instability that had come to plague the ALP during its turbulent period in government from 2007 to 2013. The at times dramatic rivalry between former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard ultimately proved politically fatal for the Labor government. In 2007, the Labor Party led by Kevin Rudd returned to office, defeating the LNP Coalition government, led by Prime Minister John Howard (Green, 2013: 1-2). The Rudd Labor government successfully responded to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, where a stimulus spending package kept the economy out of recession, one of the few developed countries which managed to do so (Megalogenis, 2012: 340-345). However, Rudd was largely undone by his attempt to implement an Emissions Trading Scheme

(ETS), aimed at reducing carbon emissions, which the Coalition had also proposed in the 2007 election. After trying to negotiate a compromise ETS with Opposition Liberal Leader Malcolm Turnbull in 2009, the hard-right conservative faction of the LNP, driven by climate change skeptics, was already dissatisfied with Turnbull's rather aloof and alienating leadership style (which would also be a failing of Rudd's leadership). A leadership challenge was contested on December 1st by Turnbull, Joe Hockey, and Tony Abbott; Hockey was eliminated in the first round, with Abbott elected Opposition Leader in the second round, 42 to 41 against Turnbull (Wanna, 2010: 279).

Confronted by Abbott's relentlessly aggressive style, Rudd backed down from implementing an ETS, following the failure to achieve a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol at the UN COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen. Amid declining opinion polls, Rudd was successfully challenged by his Deputy leader Julia Gillard on June 23rd 2010, who became the first female Prime Minister of Australia (Kefford, 2013: 137). Following the August 21st 2010 election called soon after (during which Labor's campaign was undermined by damaging leaks from disgruntled Rudd supporters), Gillard negotiated a minority government with the support of the Australian Greens Party and Independents, after the election result delivered a rare 'hung' parliament (Cassidy, 2010: 105-106, 234-235).

Despite passing an impressive range of legislation on education and social security, as well as a temporarily fixed price on carbon (remorselessly called a 'carbon tax' and a 'broken promise' by Abbott and the Coalition), leadership speculation dogged the Gillard government, undermining its public image and disrupting any effective political marketing of its policy delivery. Rudd unsuccessfully challenged in February 2012, after which he lost his position as Foreign Minister; an abortive attempt by his supporters in March 2013 also failed. However, as opinion polls continued to decline, with an election date looming, Rudd retained a shallow advantage in public opinion over Gillard. Desperate Labor MPs ruefully re-elected Rudd as Prime Minister, after another challenge on June 26th, 2013 (Evans & McCaffrie, 2014: 317-319). Unsurprisingly, amid this leadership disunity, Labor was decisively defeated by the Abbott-led LNP Coalition on the election of September 7th, 2013. The LNP won 90 out of the 150 seats in the lower House of Representatives; Labor won 55, with one each to the Greens, Katter's Australia Party and the Palmer United Party, and two independents. The two-party preferred (2 PP) vote was 53.5% for the Coalition, and 46.5% for Labor. Under new party leadership election rules implemented by Rudd after his brief return as PM, where the ALP membership was given a share of the vote as well as Labor MPs, Bill Shorten became Opposition Leader of the ALP, defeating frontbench contender Anthony Albanese (McCallister, 2015: 337).

Promises Fulfilled: Taxes Abolished, Boats Stopped

Once in office, the Abbott Coalition government set about implementing its core campaign promises: repealing Labor's 'carbon tax' and super-profit mining tax; and its controversial *Operation Sovereign Borders*, turning back asylum seeker boats coming from Indonesia, and continuing to detain asylum seekers arriving by boat in offshore camps, on Nauru, and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (re-established in 2012-13 by the previous Labor government) (Maley, 2015). In doing so, the Coalition could claim it had finally 'stopped the boats', a policy generally popular among the electorate, although it has been widely criticised by Indonesia, and human rights organisations, including the UNHCR. Despite attempts by the Coalition government to restrict media access and reduce transparency, by relying on outsourced corporations (Transfield, Serco, and Wilson Security) to run the offshore detention centres, revelations have continued to emerge of poor conditions in the camps, and mistreatment of asylum seekers, including allegations of rape and sexual assault, child abuse and deaths in custody. The Abbott government even went so far as to make it unlawful for medical staff in offshore detention centres to publicly report any abuse of children in detention (Australian Senate, 2015: 187-189). As of 30 September 2015, 1,811 asylum seekers were in detention on Australian territory, with an additional 631 on Nauru, and 934 on Manus Island (DIBP/ABF, 2015: 4).

Promises Broken: Aftermath of the 2014 Budget

Tony Abbott was never particularly popular among the public, and approval ratings for the Coalition began to fall behind the ALP soon after the 2013 election, as early disillusionment with the new government set in. This was accelerated by the Abbott government's first harsh austerity budget, delivered by then Treasurer Joe Hockey in May 2014. Aimed at reducing the deficit in government spending, the budget effectively broke many of Abbott's promises in the 2013 election campaign, including pledges not to cut health, education, and welfare spending (Millar, 2015).

Many of the budget's measures included plans to: cut unemployment benefits for young people, introduce a co-payment for doctor visits, and deregulate higher education, resulting in higher student fees. However, these controversial measures were blocked by the new Senate; it came into effect from July 2014, following a unique re-election for Senators from Western Australia in March, after ballot papers for the 2013 election were lost by the Electoral Commission. The current Senate comprises eighteen cross-benchers, the highest number ever, who include: 10 for the Australian Greens, their highest number yet; three originally from the Palmer United Party (PUP), although

Senators Jackie Lambie and Glenn Lazarus would soon quit the PUP to form their own minor parties, after falling out with PUP leader Clive Palmer; one independent (Nick Xenophon); and one each from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Democratic Labour Party (whose Senator John Madigan would also later separate from his party to stand as an independent); Family First; and the Australian Motoring Enthusiasts Party. The LNP has 33 Senators, the ALP 24 (Wanna, 2015: 280-281). The 2015 budget delivered in May attempted to repair the political damage of the previous years', by providing generous tax cuts to small business and farmers, which were generally well received. The other arm of the Abbott government's supposed political strength, national security, was reinforced in the 2015 budget by further increases to security and defence spending, and ongoing cuts to foreign aid (as well as cuts to the arts, scientific research, and environmental funding). Labor and the Greens pressured Treasurer Hockey by citing models which showed the 2015 budget would continue to have a negative impact on those on lower incomes, as did the 2014 budget. Key budget measures still face being blocked in the Senate, particularly those raising the cost of health and education (Grattan, 2015).

The Coalition's 'debt and deficit' rhetoric of the 2014 budget, ruthlessly applied against Labor when in Opposition, was quietly abandoned, as the Abbott government had the highest proportion of GDP of tax revenue and government spending (25.9%), since the first budgets of the Howard and Rudd governments. As well as imposing a 'deficit levy', the Coalition has also floated increasing the rate of the Goods and Services Tax, currently at 10%. The government target for the budget to return to surplus is by 2020/21; but this is assuming rather highly optimistic projections that commodity prices and the Chinese and Indian economies will remain buoyant (Koukoulas, 2015).

Northeast Asian FTAs

One of the Abbott government's most prominent attempts to burnish its economic credentials was a trifecta of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Australia's largest trading partners. These were achieved in the wake of Tony Abbott's tour of northeast Asia in April 2014, which included an especially large entourage of three senior ministers, five State premiers, 30 corporate CEOs, and hundreds of business representatives and advisers. Abbott's visit to Japan during April 5-7 saw the completion of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), ending Australian tariffs on Japanese manufacturing imports, in return for greater (but not full) Australian access to Japanese agriculture markets, particularly beef, wine, and horticultural products. This finally concluded negotiations which had been ongoing since 2007, the lack of progress largely due to resistance by Japanese farmers to greater foreign market access (DPM&C, 2014 a).

Abbott was also the first foreign leader to attend a meeting of Japan's new National Security Council, and announced negotiations for an agreement to encourage joint development of military technology, equipment and weapons systems. Abbott expressed support for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's re-interpretation of Japan's constitution, to allow participation in collective self-defence with allies, and resume arms exports. Australia and Japan will also deepen security cooperation, including more joint training exercises to improve interoperability between the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) (DPM&C, 2014 b).

These ties were reciprocated by Abe's return visit to Australia in July 2014, where he was granted the rare privilege of an address to a joint sitting of Parliament. During the visit, Abe and Abbott formally signed both the EPA, and the rapidly-drafted Agreement on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology (although a future Australian purchase of Japanese submarines remains undetermined at the time of writing) (MoFAoJ, 2014). Abbott confirmed the Korea-Australia Free Trade Agreement (KAFTA) during the South Korean leg of his tour of Northeast Asia in April 2014, which aims to eliminate the remaining low level of tariffs between the ROK and Australia. There were some delays in ratifying KAFTA in the South Korean parliament, but it was eventually approved (de Silva, 2014: 58-59). Abbott's 2014 visit to China during April 9-11 aimed to reassure China over Australia's closer security ties with Japan, and to also pursue an FTA for greater market access to Australia's largest trading partner (MoFAoPRC, 2014). The China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) was formalised in June 2015, although it was not yet ratified by parliament. While the FTAs have generally enjoyed bipartisan support from the ALP, Labor's 2015 national conference decided to revoke the Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions from FTAs, and Labor maintains concerns over the use of foreign workers under ChAFTA (leading the Coalition to accuse Labor and the unions of xenophobia). The Australian Productivity Commission has also questioned the overall economic benefits of FTAs (Chan, 2015). However, negotiations with Labor have finally seen an agreement to allow ChAFTA to be ratified (Maher, 2015).

The post-mining boom Economy

Concerns over the stability of the global economy, fuelled by the Greek/Eurozone crisis, and the slowing of the Chinese economy, the end of the mining boom, declining manufacturing, weak domestic activity, and a potential property 'bubble', all indicates uncertain economic fortunes ahead for Australia. This could prove troublesome for the Coalition government in the leadup to the next election due in 2016. If the economy continues to slow, which will put pressure on the government to bring on a stimulatory pre-election budget, this will increase the level of public debt, and raise the deficit, undermining the Coalition's slogan of promoting 'jobs and growth' (Das, 2015). The

Australian dollar reached a six-year low of 69.59 US cents in September 2015, which counters the effect of the slump in global commodity prices to some extent (Aitken, 2015).

However, Australia's terms of trade has declined by at least 27% over the past two years, as commodity prices have declined. The value of Australia's commodity exports – metals, ores and minerals – has now been overtaken again by exports of services, which last occurred in 2009, before the last stage of the mining boom. This undermines the Coalition government's optimistic plans that economic growth and the resulting revenues will eventually reduce Australia's levels of debt and deficit, and see a return to surplus (Janda, 2015). Real wages, household incomes and retail sales have remained generally flat, so these ongoing pressures on the future of Australian economy will remain a concern (Austin, 2015). Annualised economic growth rates of 2% are at their lowest level since 2011, and continues a downward trend, down from 3.5% last year, with growth in the March-June quarter of 2015 only reaching 0.2%, raising fears that the Australian economy could potentially slip into recession, if the downward trend continues. Australia's growth is now ranked 19th in the OECD (ABS, 2015 a). Unemployment has remained steady, at 6.1% for October 2015 (ABS, 2015 b).

'Direct Action' Environment Policy

One of the Abbott government's proudest achievements was the repeal of Labor's 'carbon tax' legislation – a fixed price on carbon emissions paid by the 300 largest polluters, meant to shift to a floating price from 2014. This was replaced by the Coalition's 'Direct Action' policy: subsidising large polluters to reduce emissions, plus increased regulation and projects such as a 'Green Army' to promote reforestation. Environment Minister Greg Hunt released a White Paper in 2014 detailing the \$2.55 billion Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) (DoE, 2014).

There are severe doubts though that Australia will be able to move beyond the Coalition's declared target of only 5% emission cuts by 2020, particularly after the government has further downgraded investment in renewable energy, favouring the fossil fuels industry instead. Direct Action has been widely criticised by economists and climate scientists as inadequate and ultimately unfeasible, particularly as companies can effectively escape any penalty for polluting carbon emissions, given the weak nature of the ERF's 'Safeguard Mechanism' (Keane, 2015 a). The Abbott government also had its environmental credibility questioned at the G 20 Leaders' Summit held in Brisbane in November 2014, which was meant to be a diplomatic highlight for the government. The Abbott government reacted defensively to a speech by US President Barack Obama delivered during the visit, where he called for stronger action on climate change, and greater protection for Australia's

World Heritage status Great Barrier Reef (Di Stefano, 2014).

Serious tensions within the Coalition were also exposed with a decision by Hunt (and the NSW Coalition government) to approve a \$1.2 billion Chinese-owned coal mine in the electorate of National Party Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce, who is firmly opposed to it going ahead. This dispute within the government followed the release of a downgraded Agriculture White Paper, with only \$1 billion in agriculture support projects announced, instead of the expected \$4 billion (Guardian, 2015). The Coalition's overt support for the coal mining industry has also seen it encounter further significant political difficulty, when a huge coal mine in Queensland proposed by Indian multinational corporation Adani was vetoed by the Federal Court, ruling that Hunt's Environment Department had failed to carry out proper consideration of the environmental impact the mine would have had on endangered species, and potentially on the Great Barrier Reef. The response of the Abbott government was to attempt to amend legislation to make it harder for conservation groups to bring legal action against mining and development projects, which engendered further criticism of its overall environmental record (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

The Deepening National Security State

The Abbott government's pursuit of a strong image on national security sought to regain support from the public, and attempted to portray Labor as 'soft' on terrorism and asylum seekers. In early 2015, the government began exploring a proposed law (called the *Allegiance to Australia Bill*) to strip dual Australian nationals of their citizenship, if they were found to be supporting terrorist activities. Abbott was backed in this in a letter sent to him by 43 conservative backbenchers; however, divisions soon emerged within the Coalition's Cabinet over the proposed bill. Leaks to the media revealed that senior Ministers, including Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, then Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and even Nationals Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce were concerned over giving the Immigration Minister (now Peter Dutton) powers to revoke citizenship without legal recourse, which may be unconstitutional (Rundle, 2015) The citizenship law amendments were remorselessly used by Abbott to conflate the issue of national security, accusing Labor (and public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC]) as weak on terrorism; as with asylum seekers, by pursuing this policy, the Coalition pandered to its core party support base, and the conservative media (particularly outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation), playing on public anxiety and xenophobia. This is a long-running policy approach of the Coalition, going back at least to the Howard government, and the 'War on Terror' following the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 (Keane, 2015 b).

Further divisions over national security emerged among the government when Turnbull gave an erudite speech warning that the threat of terrorism should not be exaggerated, as this only plays into the hands of terrorists, such as Islamic State (IS - also referred to by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*). This classically liberal defence of the tradition of the rule of law and democratic principles in the face of national danger was a veiled criticism of Abbott's bellicose rhetoric, with his constant referral to *Da'esh* as a 'death cult', 'coming to get us'. In a remarkable scaremongering exaggeration, Foreign Minister Bishop also called IS a greater threat than the Cold War (despite *Da'esh's* lack of strategic reach or nuclear weapons) (Iggulden, 2015).

In measures to counter the threat of Australians returning radicalised by *Da'esh*, the Abbott government, again with largely unquestioning bipartisan support from Labor, introduced legislation in February 2015 which intensified counter-terrorism powers obtained in the wake of the 'War on Terror' since 2001. New restrictions were placed on travel to areas of Iraq and Syria, and laws to retain internet users' 'metadata' by security authorities, and to punish journalists and public servants revealing 'secret operations' were also passed, despite concerns this will do little to protect against terrorism, but instead erode the civil liberties of all Australians (Sparrow, 2015).

Public resentment against encroaching surveillance powers erupted over a proposed joint operation in August 2015 by the Victorian Police and the Department of Immigration and Border Security's new paramilitary Australian Border Force (ABF), with a media release implying people would be randomly stopped in Melbourne's CBD, in a search for visa violators. This sparked an immediate backlash and public protests, which saw '*Operation Fortitude*' hurriedly cancelled on the same day it was announced. Abbott denied the Prime Minister's Office had any role in the planned operation, but the embarrassing and poorly-handled incident displayed the lack of transparency and incompetence in the Immigration Department under Minister Dutton (Anderson, 2015).

Australia Goes Back to War

The Abbott Coalition government was one of the first to pledge military support to the US-led coalition against *Da'esh* in Iraq. In October 2014, the Abbott government committed the deployment of around 600 ADF personnel to Iraq; these included 200 Special Forces advisers, and 6 F/A-18 'Super Hornets', which were soon carrying out airstrikes against *Da'esh*, supported by three refuelling/transport aircraft. This latest Australian intervention in the Middle East, termed *Operation Okra*, has at least a greater degree of legitimacy under international law compared to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, since it is at the request of the sovereign government of Iraq, and due to the many atrocities and war crimes *Da'esh* has perpetuated. The large number of foreign fighters to

have joined *Da'esh* has included at least 250 Australians (out of potentially up to 20,000 foreign fighters), providing another justification claimed by the Abbott government to support ADF involvement alongside US forces, and other coalition members (Switzer, 2015). However, as with Australia's involvement in the 2003 Iraq War, there is the danger that joining this latest US-led coalition will only aggravate any potential terrorist threat to Australia. Similar to the first Iraq War, the intervention against *Da'esh* is not popular with the public, with a recent poll indicating only 36% support the return of the ADF to Iraq (Essential, 2015).

Following an Iraqi government counteroffensive against *Da'esh* in Tikrit in March 2015, controversially aided by Shi'ite militias covertly backed by Iran, Abbott's Cabinet confirmed an increase of around 330 more ADF troops to replace the 200 Special Forces in their training and advisory role, joined by 143 advisers from New Zealand, deployed from June. This latest 'building partner capacity initiative' will last at least two years, and will raise the annual cost of Australia's involvement in the Middle East to at least \$400 million. It will make the ADF mission the second-largest of the coalition partners, after the US forces. As the US (as well as Russia) has commenced airstrikes against *Da'esh* in Syria, the Abbott government followed suit, with Super Hornet strikes extended beyond *Da'esh* targets in Iraq to Syria (Griffiths, 2015). Analysts and former military commanders have raised serious doubts though over whether Australia joining the bombing campaign against *Da'esh* in Syria will have any significant effect. Aircrews will be put at greater risk, and airstrikes are likely to inflict civilian casualties. Joining airstrikes on Syrian territory is legally dubious under international law, and while it may inflict some tactical damage against *Da'esh* targets, it will do little to resolve the lack of strategic and diplomatic direction required to solve the complex tragedy of the Syrian civil war (Conifer, 2015). The Abbott government meanwhile considered its response to the Syrian refugee crisis, indicating it was prepared to receive more refugees, in addition to the annual total refugee intake of 13,750. Labor, the Greens, and some Liberal MPs pressured the government to increase the humanitarian intake of Syrian refugees, with a commitment finally reached that some 12,000 will be accepted, after security vetting (Henderson & Uhlmann, 2015).

'Captain's Picks' and Leadership Speculation

As the fallout over the stalled budget continued into 2015, Abbott's so-called 'Captain's picks', unilateral decisions without consulting Cabinet, continued to be unpopular, particularly the decision to restore Australian knighthoods for the Australia Day Honours list on January 26th, extraordinarily awarding one to Queen Elizabeth's husband, Prince Phillip. According to a poll held afterwards, only 12.1% of Australians supported this restoration, with frontbenchers Malcolm Turnbull and

Julie Bishop being preferred as Liberal leader by 45% and 30.5% respectively, indicating their potential as leadership replacements; Abbott only received 18% support (Medhora, 2015).

Reflecting this decline in the public mood, on February 9th 2015, the Liberal backbench brought on a party room vote whether to proceed with a leadership ballot; it was defeated 61 to 39, but the fact that up to 40% of backbenchers were prepared to vote against Abbott indicated how rapidly his fortunes had declined, only halfway through his term in office. Abbott was aided by there being no clear declared leadership rival at this stage; the moderate Turnbull did not have the favour of the Liberals' conservatives; Bishop was also held in some suspicion by party hardliners; the candidate most likely to be favoured by the hard right, Social Services Minister Scott Morrison (formerly Immigration Minister) did not enjoy enough public popularity (BBC, 2015).

Following developments in Ireland and the USA which secured rights to same-sex marriage, divisions were also exposed within the Coalition, as Australia remains the last English-speaking developed country which does not have legal same-sex marriage anywhere in its jurisdiction. The debate over same-sex marriage became a headache for the socially conservative Abbott, as more moderate Liberal MPs submitted private members' bills advocating same-sex marriage. These joined bills previously submitted by the Greens and Labor, which hopes to divide the Coalition on this issue, given that polls consistently give public support for same-sex marriage at around 70%. After an LNP party room meeting in August, Abbott proposed a referendum or plebiscite be held in 2017, seeking to delay any decision, even though a vote in parliament to change the Marriage Act is all that is required. Socially conservative Liberal rank-and-file branch party members are pressuring their MPs to oppose any change. As of July 2015, 82 Coalition MPs remained opposed; only 18 supported voting for same-sex marriage, while 23 were undecided (Matthewson, 2015).

Another of Abbott's 'Captain's picks' unravelled when the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Liberal MP Bronwyn Bishop, who had been preferred by Abbott, found herself subject to a scandal over revelations in July 2015 that she had taken a taxpayer-funded helicopter flight to a Liberal Party fundraising meeting (for a journey that would have taken around an hour by car). Speaker Bishop had long been criticised by the Labor Opposition for her perceived bias towards the government, having ejected a record 393 Labor MPs during parliamentary Question Time, compared to seven Coalition MPs. After resisting calls to resign for over three weeks, being strongly supported by Abbott, Bishop finally relented after further revelations of extravagant travel spending were uncovered. Bishop resigned on August 2, replaced by the more moderate Liberal MP Tony Smith (ABC, 2015 a).

Is Labor Ready to Lead Again?

It remains to be seen though whether Labor under Opposition Leader Bill Shorten can yet effectively exploit the divisions and blunders of the Coalition government. In an attempt to present an image of constructive bipartisanship, and to avoid being politically outflanked on various contentious issues, the ALP under Shorten has actually cooperated with the government on a range of policies. On the last sitting day of the 2015 winter session of parliament, the government voted to amend laws to secure the offshore processing of asylum seekers against a potential High Court Challenge, which was supported by the ALP, being fearful of being wedged on national security. Labor also voted with the government for the amendment to ensure there is no mandatory requirement to report the sexual abuse of children in asylum seeker detention camps on Nauru and Manus Island. Labor had also supported the formation of the new paramilitary ABF, which amalgamated Customs law enforcement with Immigration Department detention services. Labor has also voted with the government to allow stronger internet censorship, through metadata retention, and has backed the return of Australian military forces to Iraq and Syria (Taylor, 2015 a). However, the more the ALP has cooperated with the government, the less Shorten appeals to the public, with greater public awareness of Shorten translating into lower approval ratings; bipartisanship has therefore brought no political benefits. A former Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Shorten is the least experienced Opposition leader in recent times, only being elected to parliament since 2007, and appointed to the Ministry in 2010. This exposes another cost of the period of Labor Rudd-Gillard rivalry, where many experienced Ministers were driven out, especially after Rudd's return in 2013 (Tingle, 2015).

Shorten's dubious role as one of the key factional powerbrokers behind Labor's period of leadership rivalry and challenges was further exposed when Shorten admitted to lying in a 2013 radio interview about his role in the Rudd-Gillard leadership spill; Shorten had then denied he was having talks with Rudd, and was fully supporting Gillard. The history of the Rudd-Gillard rivalry rather inconveniently resurfaced with the broadcast of the ABC's documentary series *The Killing Season* (ABC, 2015 b). This admission preceded Shorten's appearance in July 2015 at the Trade Union Royal Commission (TURC), established by the Abbott government upon its election, ostensibly to expose union corruption. Grilled on his previous role as Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union, Shorten admitted a failure to declare up to \$40,000 in corporate and union donations for his 2007 election campaign. This was damaging, but unlikely to be politically fateful, given the overall lack of transparency on political campaign donation laws – politicians and parties can issue late, or updated declarations years after campaigns, which Prime Minister Abbott himself

had done. Shorten performed fairly confidently under questioning, answering over 900 questions over his two-day appearance (Karp, 2015).

Labor has claimed that TURC, costing at least \$80 million, is a political witchhunt, following previous Coalition attempts to tie former Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard to the activities of corrupt trade union officials. Labor was unexpectedly assisted though by revelations that TURC's Royal Commissioner, former High Court Judge Dyson Heydon, was invited to give an address to a Liberal Party fundraising meeting. Although he eventually declined the request (after initially accepting it), Labor and the ACTU claimed this was evidence of bias, and called for Heydon to step down. He refused to do so, backed by the Abbott government, which has led to Labor taking action in the Senate to request the Governor-General, Sir Peter Cosgrove (also knighted on Abbott's recommendation) remove Heydon as Royal Commissioner. While this rare Senate action is unlikely to be successful, the overall effect of this controversy has been to blunt the Coalition's attempted political attack on Shorten and the Labor Opposition, with TURC ultimately making no adverse findings against Shorten (Webster, 2015).

The potentially fractious Labor national conference of July 2015 was another obstacle for the ALP to hurdle in the lead-up to an election year. The conference was the most finely balanced one since 1984, with 196 delegates from the Left faction, 197 from the Right, and four nonaligned (Hurst, 2015). Contentious issues included confirming policy towards asylum seekers, same-sex marriage, the Free Trade Agreement with China, and carbon emissions; despite some public divisions on these issues, they were resolved with relative equanimity, with Labor confirming its policy platform of supporting same-sex marriage, potentially turning back asylum seeker boats, and stronger action towards renewable energy targets (Altman, 2015).

Should nervous Labor MPs again feel desperate enough to mount a challenge against Shorten, if they fear another impending electoral defeat, this is now harder to do, ironically after last Labor PM Kevin Rudd passed reforms before losing the election in 2013. Leadership challenges in the ALP now require a vote from the membership, as well as the parliamentary Caucus, only after 75% of the Caucus votes to approve a challenge when in government, or 60% in Opposition. However, entering into another round of leadership instability would be electorally disastrous, with no serious alternative contenders having yet emerged at any rate (Bourke, 2015).

Abbott's Leadership Decline

After almost two years in office, Abbott's efforts to improve his support among disgruntled

backbenchers appeared to have temporarily made his leadership more secure, although problems of disunity among his Cabinet persisted (Morris, 2015). The cynicism of the electorate only worsened though, as Labor and the Coalition become more partisan and focused on short-term political point-scoring, rather than pursue long-term policy debate and reform. This was seen in the ongoing relatively high net dissatisfaction ratings for both Abbott and Shorten (Bowe, 2015). Opinion polls showed the Abbott government remained in a losing position, despite a short-lived and shallow ‘bounce’ after the 2015 Budget. Despite ramping up national security threats, and indulging in ‘culture war’ rhetoric against trade unions, environmentalists, the ABC and the Fairfax-owned media, the Human Rights Commission, and over same-sex marriage, this had no appeal to the public, even though it played well to the conservative Coalition party base. Both Abbott and Shorten continued to see their approval ratings decline, with Shorten having consistently overtaken Abbott as preferred prime minister. Labor was ahead of the LNP in 149 out of 151 opinion polls from April 2014 to July 2015; the Coalition was behind in the polls overall since the 2013 election (Murphy, 2015).

Tony Abbott thus confronted a political dilemma; after ‘stopping the boats’, scrapping the carbon and mining taxes, and abandoning the repair of the ‘debt and deficit’, his government was only really left with national security as its major focus. This issue had already reached its limit of political effectiveness, as well as resulting in a more risky foreign policy (White, 2015). Any important policy reform had been effectively abandoned, as Abbott and the Coalition conducted themselves as if they were still in Opposition; permanently campaigning to damage their political opponents, rather than seriously pursuing effective economic management (Taylor, 2015 b). This strategy had profoundly failed, as uncertainty over the global economy continued, much to the frustration of the business sector, which has traditionally supported the Coalition. The Abbott government abandoned promised policy reform in several core areas: in the financial services industry; the budget deficit, which has increased from \$18.8 billion to \$35.1 billion, as has public debt, from \$273 billion to \$373 billion, under the Abbott government; media reform; competition reform; superannuation tax concessions and tax reform; housing affordability; climate policy; and infrastructure development. Abbott’s government therefore turned out to be far less effective than during the turbulent period of the previous Rudd/Gillard Labor government (Keane, 2015 c).

The Ascent of Prime Minister Turnbull

It is historically rare for Australian governments to lose an election after only one term in office; however, challenges to a sitting Prime Minister in their first term were also once rare, a convention overturned during the politically disastrous rivalry between Rudd and Gillard. At the State level,

Coalition governments have already lost office to Labor after only one term, in Victoria in 2014, and Queensland in 2015. Abbott thus met a similar fate, when disgruntled Cabinet members and backbenchers, staring down potential defeat, backed a leadership challenge by Communications Minister and former Liberal Party leader Malcolm Turnbull, who prevailed over Abbott in a party room ballot 54-44, on September 14 (Palazzo et al, 2015).

In the post-challenge cabinet reshuffle, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop retained her position as Deputy Liberal Party leader, indicating she had defected in her previous support of Abbott, to back Turnbull. Treasurer Joe Hockey retired largely unlamented from politics, replaced by Scott Morrison. Five women were appointed to Cabinet, including Marise Payne, as Australia's first female Defence Minister. Noted hardline conservative ministers, such as Kevin Andrews and Eric Abetz, were consigned to join Abbott on the backbench, from where they have occasionally voiced discontent with the Turnbull government's policies, backed by supporters in the conservative media. Turnbull has since steadily carried out gradual changes to the policy approach of the Coalition government, with a distinct shift in leadership style and public communication; instead of the blunt, acerbic, confrontational attitude of Abbott, Turnbull has effectively employed a more eloquent, consultative and erudite image. Although the overall policy direction of the Coalition has had more continuity than change under Turnbull, there have been significant changes (Massola, 2015).

The university sector deregulation pushed by the Abbott government, and rejected twice by the Senate, has been abandoned by Turnbull. An avowed republican, he also reversed Abbott's most notorious 'captain's pick', by ending the appointment of Knights and Dames in the honours system. Turnbull will still hold the referendum on same-sex marriage, most likely before the next election; Turnbull is also still committed to a referendum in 2017 on indigenous recognition in the constitution. The Coalition's 'Direct Action' policy on climate change has been maintained; Australia will probably increase its purchase of international carbon credits, as the main mechanism for contributing to carbon emissions reduction, with Turnbull attending the COP21 meeting in Paris. On the economy, Turnbull has continued to float the prospect of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) being raised, although he maintains that any tax reform will be equitable. The overall philosophy of Turnbull's economic approach is to emphasise 'innovation' – the promotion of technology and infrastructure, to revitalise business and the economy in general, with more funding to be directed towards public transport, which Turnbull often personally utilises (Hunter, 2015). Turnbull has also maintained the Coalition's harsh policy of turning back asylum seeker boats, despite ongoing criticism from human rights groups and the UN. One boat was already forced back from Christmas Island, which has been subject to a riot at its detention centre (Hurst & Doherty,

2015).

Turnbull has continued ADF participation in the international military campaign against Islamic State (IS)/*Da'esh*. *Operation Okra* continues to have six F/A-18 s deployed, with 240 RAAF support staff, 90 Special Forces and 300 Army advisers training Iraqi forces. Around 250 ADF personnel also remain deployed as advisers in Afghanistan. This has comprised part of Turnbull's overall successful diplomacy in his first major overseas tour in November. In visits to Indonesia, Germany, the G 20, and APEC, he held bilateral meetings with a number of world leaders, including Shinzo Abe and Barack Obama, with whom he joined in warning China against its island-building territorial claims in the South China Sea. Following the November terrorist attacks in Paris, Turnbull backed Obama's position of not sending Western ground troops against IS, as this would be counterproductive, following the Iraq war experience (Coorey, 2015). Turnbull delivered his first National Security Statement to Parliament on November 24, confirming that no ADF ground combat forces will be deployed in Iraq or Syria, stating that the response to *Da'esh*/IS must be 'calm, clinical, professional, effective', and that 'this is not a time for gestures or machismo'. This was a clear rebuke to Abbott's frequent aggressive sniping against Turnbull in the press (Taylor, 2015).

Conclusion – Towards Election 2016

A general election is due sometime in 2016, with the prerogative of Australian Prime Ministers to call early elections at a time of their choosing; despite any speculation over an early election, there can be no doubt that the Coalition and Labor are already gearing up for a tight electoral contest in 2016 (Borrello, 2015). Should the Australian electorate fear enduring another cycle of disillusionment and weariness with politics, uninspired by either of the major parties, the Greens and other minor parties may therefore be in a better position to capitalise on this development. Recognising this potential, the Greens have introduced a bill to reform voting for the Senate, which would remove above-the-line party preference deals, and allow optional preferential voting (as in NSW and other states). This would prevent the likelihood of microparties being elected with a tiny proportion of the primary vote, as occurred in the last election. This clear political goal of the Greens to block 'third-party' rivals would also suit the two major parties. There would be no advantage then for Turnbull to call an early double-dissolution election (of the whole Senate, rather than the regular half-Senate elections), before such reforms are implemented, as it would only make it easier for more microparties to be elected to the Senate. An early double-dissolution election is therefore unlikely, for numerous constitutional and political reasons, with Turnbull indicating the government will serve its full term, which means an election is now most likely sometime in either

September or October 2016 (Green, 2015).

However, the prospects of the Coalition government being re-elected now seems increasingly likely, as Malcolm Turnbull has decisively reversed the Coalition's electoral fortunes. Soon after Turnbull became Prime Minister, the LNP regained its dominance over Labor in opinion polls; as of November, the LNP had a 53% to 47% two-party preferred lead over Labor, with Turnbull preferred as Prime Minister by 64%, compared to only 15% for Shorten (Hudson, 2015).

If this turnaround in the polls is maintained, Labor is now staring down defeat in the 2016 election, which could potentially spark yet another leadership challenge by desperate Labor MPs. However, this would be unlikely to deliver much chance of success, given Turnbull's high level of popularity; none of the potential Labor leadership contenders, such as Anthony Albanese, or Tanya Plibersek, would be likely to successfully challenge Turnbull's new political dominance. Labor could potentially be aided by internal divisions within the LNP, as discontented Abbott supporters within the government occasionally agitate against Turnbull's leadership. However, given the widespread public popularity of Turnbull so far, and the lead maintained in the polls by the Coalition under his leadership, a successful leadership challenge by Abbott for him to return as Prime Minister will remain the delusional hope of fervent conservatives (Abjorensen, 2015).

Turnbull will still have the challenge of delivering a successful pre-election budget, and effectively manage an economy with fairly lackluster growth, while delivering an effective policy on climate change. Concerns over national security issues, such as terrorism and the war against Islamic State, and regional tensions with China in the South China Sea will be major foreign policy challenges. However, having orchestrated yet another dramatic turn in Australian politics, Malcolm Turnbull now seems set to deliver another term of government for the Liberal-National Party Coalition.

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