

Some barnacles can't be removed in time for Christmas

Written by The Conversation

Some barnacles are not, it seems, able to be removed – certainly not in time for Christmas. As the political year grinds to its end, the Prime Minister's Office is under almost as much attack as that of Kevin Rudd in 2010, and the Treasurer has a budget update heading in the wrong direction.

The [last Newspoll for 2014](#) , published in Monday's Australian, shows the government trails 46-54% in two-party terms, unchanged from a fortnight ago, despite Tony Abbott backtracking on the Medicare co-payment and paid parental leave.

On Sunday, two senior ministers left Abbott swinging in the controversy over the apparently excessive power held by his chief of staff Peta Credlin.

Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull refused to be drawn, saying he intended to remain "very taciturn" on the matter because it was not productive to have the business of the PMO on the front pages.

Sensible, at one level. But Turnbull also said, in an interview on Sky: "Any views I have on matters of that kind I'll share with Tony Abbott". As the astute Turnbull would know, this left wide open the possibility there could be views to share.

Earlier, deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop [rejected](#) out of hand Abbott's Friday suggestion that sexism was behind attacks on Credlin.

In the [Sunday Telegraph](#) , Liberal backbencher and one-time whip Warren Entsch had fuelled the Credlin row, not only attacking Abbott's sexism claim but also drawing attention to the problem – complained about for years by some Liberals – that having Credlin as the leader's chief of staff while her husband Brian Loughnane is Liberal federal director is too incestuous to make for good politics.

Fresh from her Lima trip, Bishop gave Abbott a lesson in astute presentation in a long television

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interview, coming across as polished, reasonable and able to talk her way out of awkward spots, like the issue of the PMO's initial knockback of her travel to the climate conference.

"I just thought it was the wrong call, that's all, and so I raised it in cabinet, said 'What does everybody think? Should I go?'" They had a "good discussion" about it "and the PM said 'yeah, I understand where you are coming from'".

Very cool. Gloved iron fist stuff. The PMO won't be saying no to Bishop again without an internal focus group on the likely consequences.

Although her actions have ventilated the discontent with Credlin, Bishop vigorously defended the embattled chief of staff ("an essential part of our team", "a great support to the Prime Minister") but bluntly disagreed with her leader invoking the gender defence.

Abbott on Friday said Credlin's treatment would be different if she was P-E-T-E-R not P-E-T-A. Many Liberals winced, remembering Abbott's assault on Julia Gillard for, he said, playing the gender card.

Bishop said: "Well that's not the way I would put it. I have been on the record many times saying that I don't view the world through a prism of gender – I never have, I never will". No-one could miss the distancing, even though it came well-wrapped in general support and advice that if people had a problem with the PMO they should talk to the Prime Minister.

Bishop said she thought Abbott's comment "is reflecting the Prime Minister's frustration that anonymous sources have been making complaints about his chief of staff".

If Abbott is frustrated, so are people in his government. Not only are many of them critical of how the PMO is run, and fed up with seeing Credlin get so much publicity, but now Abbott invites charges of hypocrisy by suggesting sexism.

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It's not the only front where there is the whiff of hypocrisy. On the eve of announcing worse-than-forecast budget numbers, Hockey on Sunday insisted his revisions were not to be compared in any way with those constantly made by Labor.

Hockey sought to make a virtue of what will be a substantial worsening of the projected deficits. A report in [Monday's Australian](#) says the update will show a A\$40 billion blowout in the deficits which were forecast at budget time to be worth \$60 billion from this year until 2018.

Hockey told reporters: "The government has decided to use the budget, which is stronger than it was 12 months ago, as a shock absorber for the biggest fall in our export prices in many years. If we don't use the budget as a shock absorber for this extraordinary fall in our terms of trade, then Australians will lose jobs and we will lose our prosperity."

Hockey said the government had "put in place the structural reforms that have helped strengthen" the budget. Well, not exactly. Some of these structural reforms have so far not been able to navigate parliament.

The government tipped out to News Corp a list of some 175 bodies that will be scrapped, absorbed into departments or merged for an estimated saving of more than \$500 million over the budget period.

They cover almost every field of public activity, from health and education to animal welfare and biosecurity. Apart from savings and efficiency, it's also about ideology – smaller government and paring back the public service.

You can also bet this exercise will produce a fair amount of grief for the government from many quarters – nasty little pin pricks for ministers to deal with. The Vietnam veterans are already speaking out over being caught up in the hits.

One thing though – the horrors of the budget update should take attention away from the Credlin story.

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Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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