

Malcolm Turnbull's nose was out of joint when Tony Abbott said last month the Turnbull government would be running at the election on the Abbott government's record.

Turnbull insisted that while there might be continuities there was plenty of change.

This week, however, it's the continuity that's striking.

Turnbull condemned Bill Shorten's climate policy – with its emissions trading schemes and ambitious emissions reduction target – as another tax, set to drive up the cost of energy and put a brake on the economy. A far cry from his one-time passion for an ETS.

On another front, faced with a demand from Papua New Guinea to remove asylum seekers from the Manus detention centre, the Turnbull government repeatedly declares the men will never come to Australia. It's as strident as in Abbott's day, yet it is known Turnbull is uneasy about the inhumanity of keeping people indefinitely on Manus and Nauru.

What was dubbed the "PNG solution" has book-ended a term of parliament.

Shortly before the 2013 election, then prime minister Kevin Rudd forged a deal with PNG's Peter O'Neill for Australia to send boat arrivals to Manus for processing. "People who come by boat now have no prospect of being resettled in Australia," Rudd declared. "The rules have changed."

It was designed as a king hit to try to neutralise an issue that had so damaged Labor. Though it couldn't do that, the deal formed a building block in the Coalition government's policy, which relied centrally on turning back boats.

But Manus inevitably became a blight, denying inmates' human rights and embarrassing

Australia internationally.

Almost three years after the deal O'Neill, in the wake of this week's PNG Supreme Court judgment declaring the asylum seekers' detention unconstitutional, has said the Manus centre will be closed.

Immediately after Tuesday's judgment the Australian government tried to push the question of what next onto the PNG government. Now O'Neill has pushed it right back into Australia's lap. Not that the government is willing to accept it.

In his Wednesday statement O'Neill said PNG would "immediately ask the Australian government to make alternative arrangements for the asylum seekers".

He injected grievances – about both the Manus centre lingering and its going. "We did not anticipate the asylum seekers to be kept as long as they have at the Manus centre," he said. On the other hand, the closure "will have a negative effect on the local economy on Manus," and PNG would work with Australia "to seek to minimise damage to businesses and workers".

O'Neill said PNG invited people judged to be "legitimate refugees" - more than half - to live in the country "only if they want to be a part of our society". He pointedly noted that it was clear several did not want to settle in PNG.

It looks obvious that the Turnbull government will do everything possible to avoid taking responsibility for the Manus men.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said in response to O'Neill that the Australian government "will work with our PNG partners to address the issues" raised by the court judgement. But the government "has not resiled from its position that people who have attempted to come illegally by boat to Australia and who are now at the Manus facility will not be settled in Australia".

The options now appear to be for the Australian government - which will be in caretaker mode within a fortnight - to intensify the hunt for third country settlement places, or to attempt to persuade PNG to find a way to keep the Manus arrangement.

Despite the federal government refusing to give up on possible third country deals, so far it has delivered only a farcical agreement with Cambodia.

Some government sources believe PNG might be swayed by more money into devising a solution that preserves Manus.

At the least, the government hopes the issue can be moved out beyond the election. Whether that will be possible remains to be seen.

Labor can't give the government too much grief. While it says Dutton should get on a plane to PNG and sort things out, the opposition remains as committed as the Coalition to Manus. "It is of critical importance that the system of offshore processing as originally envisaged be maintained," spokesman Richard Marles said. He suggested if he were minister he would be talking to PNG with a lot on the table.

The most logical and decent course would be to bring the Manus men to Australia, allowing those found to be refugees to stay, while at the same time stepping up strong border protection to prevent people smugglers taking advantage of the situation.

Apart from PNG trying to force his hand, Turnbull knows that there must eventually be a long-term solution for people on Manus, and those on Nauru too, where a young man this week set himself on fire.

But on the cusp of an election, he won't take a backward step if he can avoid it. In an increasingly tight corner, fighting for votes, Turnbull is quite willing to don Abbott's punching gloves, especially when the fight is on issues that have delivered for the Coalition in the past.

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Written by The Conversation USA

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