

## The perils of Lindsay and the hovering Abbott shadow

Written by The Conversation USA

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It's not like the dark cloud of Kevin Rudd over Julia Gillard in 2013 but Tony Abbott's shadow is hovering over Malcolm Turnbull's campaign.

It was there ominously on Wednesday, when Turnbull was out in the Western Sydney electorate of Lindsay, with MP Fiona Scott.

Lindsay is one of those seats where things, good and bad, happen for the Liberals in an exaggerated sort of way. Like Jackie Kelly's triumph in 1996 and her crash, amid a scandal over an offensive electoral pamphlet, in 2007. Like Abbott in 2013 declaring Scott had sex appeal, which caused outrage on the day although it may have helped her local profile.

The urbane Turnbull would never be so injudicious as his predecessor. But his joint appearance with Scott was as fraught as Abbott's.

Scott was on the Turnbull list in the leadership ballot. And why wouldn't she be? Apart from anything else, her seat is on a 3% margin. But there has been blow-back, locally and elsewhere. Liberals in Abbott's seat of Warringah, who have previously supported Lindsay, made it known they didn't want to be helping Scott. They have been allocated other seats.

At his news conference Turnbull was asked whether his presence was to reward Scott for her vote "and what can you do to counter the Tony Abbott loyalists who consider her a traitor?"

In the circumstances it was less than wise for Turnbull, after talking up Scott, to invite journalists to ask her about her local activity. The reporters didn't give a toss. Instead, she was asked to explain the superannuation tax, the issue du jour, which she preferred not to tackle, saying Turnbull had already done that.

Then came the killer question: "Could you tell us which way you voted in September because it seems to be an issue for Mr Abbott's supporters in this seat that you became a traitor by voting for Mr Turnbull?"

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Scott replied that she took her role as a parliamentarian “very, very seriously. In that, the solidarity of the party room is absolutely crucial. I don’t leak from the partyroom ... I have never disclosed how I voted and frankly I never will. Because I think it’s important for members of parliament to be able to take the trust of their communities and the trust of their community is taking your vows and your oaths very seriously. ... I hold my own moral code ... and I’m not going to break what I think is a very important oath to both the party ...”

At this point Turnbull jumped in to say Scott had spoken “courageously” and with the “highest integrity”.

In fact her answer seemed quite misjudged, with its reference to “oaths” and the “solidarity of the partyroom”, which by definition was anything but solid. Nor is revealing how you voted “a leak from the partyroom” that would jeopardise community trust in you. Indeed, it could be argued an MP who voted against her prime minister in his first term had an obligation to explain her reasons to the community.

Anyway, at a tactical level Scott would have done better to say, “Yes I supported Malcolm and it’s great he’s here”.

Turnbull finished up after the news conference, although his program wasn’t completed – the Liberals said it was because the timetable had slipped.

The Turnbull-Scott appearance gave grist to Labor, which is already looking forward to Abbott campaigning in North Queensland with Nationals MP George Christensen, member for Dawson, on Thursday and Friday. Christensen is never far from controversy, whether it’s speaking at a Reclaim Australia rally or denouncing the Safe Schools program. So the dynamics will be interesting.

Christensen says Abbott will attend a “gee-up the troops” event for Liberal National Party members and supporters on Thursday, and then a “shed meeting and smoko” on a cane farm on Friday. He says Abbott is “greatly respected by a lot of the party rank and file, that’s for sure, and certainly by party supporters”.

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Before he gets to Dawson, Abbott is in the Brisbane seat of Ryan, where he was invited by a branch. The seat's MP, assistant minister Jane Prentice, who was a Turnbull backer in September, is fortuitously in Darwin.

Abbott's general strategy appears to be to behave – however defined – during this eight-week campaign. If Turnbull does poorly – is returned but with his majority much cut back – Abbott wouldn't want any blame pinned to him. Rather, he'd want to be in a position to wield some clout.

Although the former prime minister has said he doesn't see himself ever coming back as leader, some Liberal sources insist he believes one day he could, however unrealistic that might be.

What is much more realistic is that if Turnbull had only a narrow margin, Abbott and other conservatives in the party could exercise influence and make his life quite uncomfortable.

Turnbull is waiting for an election mandate so he can put more of his own stamp on his government. But if he lost a swag of seats he could face pressure over personnel and issues, outbreaks of ill-discipline and partyroom fights. A determined and powerful bunch of conservatives pushing their agenda would try his patience, never in massive supply, which could make for ratty leadership.

Bill Shorten misses no opportunity to say that when July 3 comes the Liberals will be back to infighting. Turnbull knows that unless he can retain a very solid majority and is seen to have done well, that is likely to be true.

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