

Grattan on Friday: Labor loses skin on border issue, but Turnbull will pay a price too

Written by The Conversation USA

Anticipation is core business for political strategists. Last year Bill Shorten and those around him correctly judged Labor was electorally exposed on border protection, and they had the ALP national conference change party policy to allow turnbacks.

What they didn't anticipate was how vulnerable Labor would remain on the issue. They thought the "unity ticket" they were presenting between government and opposition on borders would minimise the trouble. They also believed the moderate Malcolm Turnbull would not want to go really hard on the issue. These assumptions turned out to be flawed.

The Coalition's scare on border protection, which has run strongly in the campaign's first two weeks, is multi-pronged. It includes tallying Labor MPs and candidates who've expressed strong or mild concern about the official line; fanning fears about boats restarting under Shorten; attacking other parties' advocacy of a bigger refugee intake; and whipping up resentment over how much asylum seekers cost the taxpayer.

In an interview with 2GB's Ray Hadley on Thursday, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton constructed a cluster bomb to make his point that Shorten would be weak on border security.

"The Australian public supports us in kicking out people that have committed crimes here, of cancelling visas to paedophiles, drug dealers, murderers ... That's the work that I've been doing over the course of the last couple of years and I very strongly believe that the threat coming across our borders, when you look at what's happened in Brussels and Paris, the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere, this is a bigger issue at this election than it's ever been," Dutton said.

"And that's why I think the prime minister has demonstrated leadership and I think Mr Shorten cannot even get to first base ... he wouldn't be able to stop people smugglers because of the division within his own party."

After Hadley told Dutton that his dinner companions had said "more Peter Duttons" were needed, Dutton assured his audience Turnbull was "rock solid" on the border issue. One might have idly wondered who was running whom in the relationship between prime minister and

minister.

Turnbull has tweaked the message into something more sophisticated, but he is on board. As well as describing his minister as “outstanding”, Turnbull accused Shorten of “demonising” Dutton – who is a pretty deft hand at the demonising game himself, especially when he mentions the Greens' Sarah Hanson-Young.

In Dutton's Queensland seat of Dickson, GetUp is launching a campaign against him, with door-knocking, phone banks, and media messages. On a comfortable 6.7% margin Dutton won't be too worried, unlike a few years ago when he unsuccessfully tried to flee to another seat because he feared Dickson would fall (it didn't). Indeed, his macho performances as immigration minister may bring him votes.

Turnbull's Howard-not-so-lite approach will upset many in the migrant community, and in the so-called “doctors' wives” areas. It would be interesting to know what they think of it in his Wentworth electorate. Those on the progressive centre-right who invested such hope in him, thinking he was different, will be further dismayed.

But Turnbull's “rock solid” stand is likely to play well in Queensland and Western Australia in particular. One Liberal MP, a moderate, says of border protection: “It's a massive issue across Australia”.

Some Labor sources, however, say it has slipped down the ranks of people's concerns and voters recognise there's bipartisanship. So to stir the old feelings the government has to go really hard, as Dutton is doing.

As the Coalition ramps up the scare it is worth considering how similar or different are the positions of the two sides.

The government turns back boats, and Labor says it would do so.

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The Coalition claims Shorten wouldn't be able to sustain a policy of turnbacks because of internal division. Labor can point to the conference decision, the authority Shorten would have as prime minister, and the fact that opponents of the policy would be in a minority in caucus.

Both sides back offshore processing. The ALP promises a more transparent approach and says it would find third countries to resettle refugees from Manus and Nauru. The government has been highly secretive about the offshore centres, suppressing as much information as it can. Its search for third countries has produced only a farcical deal with Cambodia. But Labor has not been convincing in arguing it would be more successful.

On refugees, Labor wants the annual humanitarian number to be 27,000 by 2025; the government is committed to 18,750 by 2018-19.

There are some differences between government and opposition on asylum seeker/refugee policy, however they are nowhere near as great as Turnbull would have people believe, and to assert Shorten couldn't deliver a strong border protection policy doesn't make it true.

But the fact remains that while Labor has gone into this campaign on the front foot in a range of policy areas, on border control it finds itself in its customary default position – on the defensive.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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