

## Grattan on Friday: The Turnbull government begins to wash its face

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Finally – though who knows for how long – we see signs of the Turnbull government pulling up its socks. Or, to adapt a phrase often used by Scott Morrison, it started to “wash its face” in this second week of the new parliament.

The deal with Labor to secure the passage of its omnibus bill, which will now produce A\$6.3 billion in savings, and the (albeit belated) announcement of a compromise superannuation package that won the support of the Coalition backbench were positive signs for a prime minister whose first anniversary received mostly bad reviews.

Both tone and focus were better from a government that’s been all over the place as well as ill-disciplined – although the need for a filibuster when the Senate lacked work on Monday was untidy.

On the other side of the ledger it seems nearly certain the legislation introduced on Wednesday for the same-sex marriage plebiscite is doomed, because Bill Shorten has flagged Labor is readying to oppose it. But even that has some upside for Malcolm Turnbull, who could do without the distraction of a campaign.

Despite the spotlight on the Senate crossbench, the first legislative pact of the new parliament – on the omnibus bill – was between government and Labor. They also agreed, to the anger of the Greens, to sit the Senate as late as necessary on Thursday to get the bill through before parliament rose for a three-week break.

The big question is whether this will be the start of further government-Labor co-operation on the key issue of budget repair. Shorten doesn’t want to give Turnbull any breaks, but Labor also has to keep burnishing its economic responsibility credentials.

The government needs to tot up more wins, and quite quickly – and not just on budget matters but on other issues too. The signs are its approach will be more pragmatic than pure, as we have seen on the omnibus bill and super.

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With speculation that it will split its company tax cut to get the easier part passed – the relief for smaller enterprises – Morrison was asked on Thursday how flexible he'd be on the tax plan. "We'll work with the parliament to maximise everything we can achieve in this parliament," he said. "And where I can get 100% of 100%, I will go for 100% of 100%, but 100% of nothing is not the sort of pragmatic approach that I think the Australian people expect of this government."

If the government is to get through its double dissolution trigger measures to restore the Australian Building and Construction Commission and toughen union governance, compromises will be needed, and those will have to be with crossbenchers rather than Labor. Employment Minister Michaelia Cash will be working on this during the parliamentary break.

So far the non-Green Senate crossbenchers haven't had to do anything difficult. It's been their peacock time, when newcomers have flaunted colourful and controversial claims and opinions in maiden speeches.

Derryn Hinch spoke for more than 45 minutes – the usual is 20 – and named alleged paedophiles. One Nation's Malcolm Roberts called for an "Aus-exit" from the United Nations, with its "unelected swill".

Pauline Hanson, in a twist on her original maiden speech, declared Australia was being swamped by Muslims and Muslim immigration should be stopped.

To stretch a concept mostly associated with issues, Hanson presents a "wicked problem" for the government. She's a player with substantial power. She heads a Senate party of four; for the government to get measures through that are opposed by Labor and Greens, Hansonite votes will be needed. On the other hand, Turnbull abhors her offensive and divisive signature stands.

So the government has to deal with her on a day-to-day basis, but also distance itself from her extremism. If it robustly contests her views it amplifies her voice, and may make negotiations over legislation more difficult. If it pulls its punches, for expediency or to deny her oxygen, it fails both to defend decent values and to adequately reassure the Muslim community that she is attacking.

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Cabinet Secretary Arthur Sinodinos told the ABC on Thursday: “We are not going to fall into the trap of beating up on her, increasing her prominence which then attracts more people potentially to her.”

A lot of eyes are also on Hanson’s team members. Will the loose ties holding them together come apart? Observers noted this week that already the Hansonites weren’t always voting as a bloc.

The next parliamentary sitting will give a better idea of how well the government is coping with this 45th parliament. In the meantime Turnbull, after his recent successful summit round, is now off to New York and Washington, where he will address the UN, attend US President Barack Obama’s summit on refugees, and meet with heads and experts from intelligence agencies.

On the eve of the trip, Turnbull paid an unexpectedly strong tribute to the man he overthrew a year ago this week. With Abbott sitting on the backbench, Turnbull referred in Thursday’s Question Time to “the debt” owed to him “for the leadership he showed on coming into office as prime minister in working to galvanise the strongest possible international response to the evolving threat of Daesh” and “the strength of purpose he brought to the task of restoring the integrity of our borders”.

The words, however, would not be a salve for the unreconciled former leader, for whom this week was the bleakest of anniversaries.

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

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