

Pressure on Malcolm Turnbull to bend to conservatives is stronger than ever

Written by Carol Johnson, Professor of Politics, University of Adelaide

Since his narrow 2016 election win, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has been under mounting pressure to bend to the conservative right factions of the Liberal and National parties. This pressure has been compounded by the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency.

Social conservatives both inside and outside the Coalition have been emboldened by Trump's victory. With American and European voters showing support for economic protectionist policies, Turnbull must now be concerned about threats to free market neo-liberalism in Australia.

Turnbull's small "l" liberalism has already taken a drubbing.

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott recently asserted that Turnbull had become a "[more orthodox centre-right Coalition leader](#)". Abbott noted Turnbull now talks less about innovation and the new economy, and more about national security, union corruption, and the claimed pitfalls of too much reliance on renewable energy.

Above all, Abbott argued that Trump's victory showed that the Liberals must embrace the political centre right. Failing that, Australian voters would turn to other more right-wing parties, such as One Nation.

Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi and Queensland Liberal National Party MP George Christensen [similarly claimed](#) that Trump's victory suggests the Liberals need to embrace socially conservative values or risk losing power.

Other prominent Liberal Party social conservatives, such as [Eric Abetz](#) and [Andrew Hastie](#), have also said the Coalition must take the message from Trump's victory very seriously.

As [Wayne Errington](#) and [Peter Van Onselen](#) point out in a [detailed analysis](#) of Turnbull's

political ascendancy, the prime minister's relationship with social conservatives within the Liberal Party is complex. Some, such as Matthias Cormann, Peter Dutton, Scott Morrison and Josh Frydenburg, are prepared to work cooperatively with Turnbull, for the time being at least.

But many social conservatives have strong reservations about Turnbull's original support for same-sex marriage, inclusive multiculturalism and progressive climate change policy.

Furthermore, the government's tight numbers in the House of Representatives and failure to gain a majority in the Senate have given more power to the Coalition's [ultra conservatives](#), including Cory Bernardi, George Christensen, Andrew Hastie and Eric Abetz. The government must also negotiate with One Nation in the Senate.

Turnbull's small "I" Liberal agenda?

Since his government's re-election, Turnbull has rarely been able to articulate the moderate, small "I" liberal views [he professes to adhere to](#).

The government's moves to resettle refugees in other countries [including the US](#) (if the deal can be implemented given Trump's victory) may be seen as an exception. But let's not forget John Howard's Pacific Solution also eventuated in the [resettlement of many refugees](#) in countries such as New Zealand, and even Australia.

The announcement of the US deal came only after Turnbull attempted to placate Coalition and One Nation conservatives by proposing to [ban resettled refugees](#) from ever entering Australia.

Far from being able to bring in same-sex marriage, Turnbull has been forced to defend a plebiscite that he [originally opposed](#) and was doomed to be defeated in the Senate. He has subsequently resisted pressure to have the matter decided by parliamentary vote, while [not entirely ruling that out](#) for the longer term.

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But any attempts to raise the possibility of a free vote on same-sex marriage will face major opposition from conservatives in the Liberal and National parties, with the latter securing support for a plebiscite as part of their [Coalition agreement](#) .

In September, the man who championed renewable energy when he was John Howard's environment minister became one of the first [to claim](#) that an over-reliance on wind farms had contributed to South Australia's disastrous [power blackout](#) .

Furthermore, the man who stated that he had "[no plans](#) " to change the Racial Discrimination Act has now announced an [inquiry into section 18C](#) .

Where is Malcolm?

Consequently, many voters must be agreeing with [Anthony Albanese's comment](#) that voters were disappointed in Turnbull because "when they look at Malcolm Turnbull, they hear Tony Abbott".

So, who is running the country?

It certainly doesn't appear to be the moderate, small "I" liberal Malcolm Turnbull that many voters hoped for.

The socially conservative challenge

[As was predicted](#) , Turnbull faces major problems in managing the Coalition's social conservatives – and these challenges are becoming even more difficult.

Turnbull's Liberal predecessor, John Howard, managed to [forge a link](#) between free market policies and socially conservative values. In an American Republican inspired electoral strategy,

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Howard argued that so-called “elite” and “politically correct” special interest groups – including feminist, immigrant and indigenous groups – were ripping off ordinary taxpayers via the largesse of the state.

In other words, government, rather than the market, was seen as the source of exploitation of ordinary voters.

That electoral strategy successfully linked socially conservative values with free market policies. That strategy is now in disarray in America.

[Trump and his team espouse](#) socially conservative values on issues of race, gender and sexuality while opposing free trade. They argue for the protection of American jobs and increasing government infrastructure expenditure – albeit while still cutting corporate taxes.

There are already signs that such tensions between the two strands of social conservatism and free market policies are appearing in Australia.

Abbott is arguably exploiting these tensions when he praises Turnbull for saying less about his free market-influenced innovation and new economy agenda. The tensions were there when George Christensen [said](#) :

Perhaps we needed some Trump in our political leadership when Ford announced [they were closing in Australia] while Julia Gillard was PM and under the Liberal National Coalition that Holden announced it was going.

The tensions have long been present in the way [One Nation](#) combines social conservatism on racial, gender and ethnic issues with support for protectionism and opposition to “globalism”.

Consequently, sections of the right, both inside and outside the Coalition, are increasingly

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attempting to make a Trump-style appeal to an electorate of disenfranchised, economically vulnerable voters by mobilising not just socially conservative values, but protectionist ones.

In other words, Turnbull doesn't just have to worry about [Labor's critique](#) of rising economic inequality. He also faces a socially conservative threat to his free market neo-liberalism and continuing threats to small "l" liberalism.

It is an unenviable position for Turnbull to be in. We may not see the real Malcolm any time soon.

Carol Johnson 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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