

Former prime minister Tony Abbott has taken a swipe at Malcolm Turnbull's "innovation" narrative and called for "another big push" on repairing the budget.

Abbott has also warned the Coalition should not attempt to bring in same-sex marriage this term without a plebiscite.

And he has continued to press to be put on Turnbull's frontbench – something Turnbull has indicated won't happen.

Interviewed on Sky, Abbott said the Coalition needed to sharpen the differences with Labor rather than try to minimise them.

"It's good that we're no longer talking about innovation and agility, because that, frankly, loses people. We have to talk about the issues that they understand and we've got to put it in terms of their interests and how we're going to advance their interests."

Asked soon after about the Abbott comment on innovation, Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, appearing on the ABC, said innovation and agility formed "an important part of our economic plan. For an open trading economy like Australia it is critically important that we're agile and innovative and always able to be as competitive as we possibly can be internationally".

Abbott said the government should not over-react to Pauline Hanson but "get on with the job of being a centre-right government", as "John Howard did after the 1998 election when One Nation got a very strong vote".

"Be a strong, sensible centre-right government. Be firm in articulating centre-right values, and that will minimise the risk from the right," he said.

The narrative was very important. “The job of government is sometimes to try to find a consensus, but it’s often to decide what to disagree on and a sensible centre-right government knows where it stands and it knows where it’s different from the other side.”

Abbott highlighted energy prices, Labor’s renewable energy target, and tax levels as among areas for crystallising the differences. But, pressed on Australia’s international commitment on reducing emissions, Abbott said Australia should not backtrack on that.

Calling for “a big new push on budget repair”, Abbott said that if the budget was not put into better shape “we’re ripping off our children and grandchildren – it’s a form of intergenerational theft”.

The task would not be easy, he conceded, and would require the government having a “tough conversation with the Australian people”.

He said ministers Christian Porter and Alan Tudge were beginning to have that conversation in the social services area, where there had to be consequences when people breached the rules.

Some of the issues from the 2014 budget needed to be looked at “because we can’t go on indulging what I describe as a cash splash with borrowed money”, he said.

It was to be hoped that actions taken in the budget update, to be released on December 19, secured Australia’s AAA credit rating.

Abbott said the Senate posed a particular problem for the centre-right.

“The Labor Party can get majorities to increase spending, increase regulation, to increase tax if it can be portrayed as a ‘soak the rich tax’. So the Senate is a difficulty for the centre-right and I think we do need to be thinking about it.” One possible constitutional reform that could be made to address it would enable a joint sitting after a bill was rejected twice without requiring an

election before such a sitting.

On same-sex marriage, Abbott said that “if Trump tells us anything, it is that the people are sick of governments which don’t keep their fundamental commitments. And it was a very fundamental commitment that we took to the people at the last election that if [the marriage law] were to change, it would change by way of the people’s vote, not just a parliamentary vote ... without having a people’s vote first.

“If you make a solemn pledge to the people in the election, you can’t break it,” Abbott said. It was a big thing to change the definition of marriage and “something of this magnitude should be a matter for the people, rather than just for the parliament”.

Asked whether it was still his aspiration to return to cabinet this term Abbott said he absolutely accepted this was a matter for the prime minister. “I guess it’s an issue for him whether I am or am not one of the 23 members of the partyroom most qualified to be in cabinet.”

He dismissed the proposition that he couldn’t return because of the bad relationship between him and Turnbull. “You don’t have to idolise someone to be able to work with them,” he said. “Peter Costello and John Howard sometimes had difficulties. But they worked very effectively together.”

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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