

For Malcolm Turnbull the new political year brings the prospect of strong headwinds that will make it even harder for his government to take firm and effective steps and secure voters' respect.

With the uncertainties the Trump presidency presents for Australia, the volatile mood in the Liberal Party, the challenges of many domestic issues and a dyspeptic electorate, 2017 will indeed be a most exciting time to be prime minister. It will be the excitement of multiple risks.

An early one comes next week, when Turnbull speaks at the National Press Club on Wednesday about his agenda (Bill Shorten is there Tuesday).

The pundits are intoning about the significance of this performance. The danger of such a "set-piece" occasion is obvious – the higher the expectations, the more difficult to meet them.

The pressure for a major speech to "frame" the year is great but to bring it off Turnbull will have to be convincing in a sceptical climate, as he canvasses jobs, energy prices, industry, infrastructure, housing, and the like. He can't afford a reaction that it's all "same old".

Already 2017 has started poorly for Turnbull. The polling is bad – Essential this week had the Coalition trailing Labor 46-54%. And in a repeat of last summer, Turnbull was forced into a reshuffle by a minister self-destructing – previously Jamie Briggs over an incident in a bar, now Sussan Ley over entitlements.

Nevertheless the change of health minister could ultimately benefit the government given that Greg Hunt, who has replaced Ley, is a better performer. Hunt has a similar political remit to the one John Howard gave Tony Abbott when he made him health minister in 2003: to stop health being a running sore for the Coalition. Only, in 2003, there was ready money to smooth the way.

Unless the government decides to act earlier, health is likely to be a feature of the May budget, as is housing affordability. Conservative up-and-comer Michael Sukkar, appointed assistant

minister to the treasurer in the reshuffle, has been assigned to concentrate on the latter.

It's noteworthy that the government's preoccupation with both these major areas is driven more by the need to solve immediate problems than any vision for landmark reform.

This week we have seen how Donald Trump is already having his impact on Australia and our politics, and there will be a lot more to come. Trump's formal rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has brought contrasting reactions from Turnbull and Shorten, with Turnbull clinging to a very slim hope of a TPP without America and Shorten saying just move on.

The extent of Trump's provocative approach to China, which could raise the most serious dilemmas for Australia, is yet to be revealed. So is whether his coming crackdown on the US' refugee intake will curb or scuttle Turnbull's deal with the Obama administration for the resettlement of people from Nauru and Manus Island.

Turnbull said on Thursday: "I am confident that we will maintain the arrangements that we have entered into with the previous administration. They are in the interests of both parties."

We see Trumpist-type politics, populist and exploiting the alienation many people feel, manifested in Hansonism and the reaction against the major parties. How deeply this is biting will be measured soon in Western Australia and Queensland.

While the federal impact of state elections can be negligible, equally they can be important for an embattled national government. The Newman government's dramatic demise in early 2015 helped prompt the (unsuccessful) first move against Tony Abbott.

On March 11, Western Australians go to the polls, with the Barnett Liberals on the back foot, and eyes on One Nation's performance in the upper house. Labor is ahead on the two-party vote, but has a formidable challenge in terms of seats. ABC election analyst Antony Green calculates that for a majority ALP government Labor has to gain ten seats on a 10% uniform swing. Both Liberal and Labor sources believe One Nation could get the balance of power in the WA upper house.

Grattan on Friday: 2017 will test whether Turnbull can rise above times that do not suit him

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Queensland, with its knife-edge Labor government, is not due to vote for a year but the election is widely tipped for 2017. An expected very large One Nation vote makes the outcome unpredictable.

The results in both WA and Queensland will feed into the fortunes of the Turnbull government.

Within his own ranks, the politically centrist Turnbull has been constantly constrained by the strength of the conservatives in the Liberal Party (as well as by the Nationals), and he can expect another year of having his arm twisted up his back.

The battle over changing Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act will come to a head after a parliamentary committee reports late next month. Meanwhile attention is on South Australian Liberal senator Cory Bernardi – senior government sources expect him to leave the party to lead his own conservative movement, which he set up some time ago.

Bernardi's defection would mean another crossbencher to negotiate with in the Senate. His views would overlap many of Pauline Hanson's but differ from hers on some issues, notably protectionism.

As he surveys a bleak scene, Turnbull has to decide both his priority issues – his agenda has been woolly and scatty – and how he handles populist sentiment. Does it confront it head on, or cut bargains with it?

All leaders must "listen" and take into account public opinion. But the present situation is different, now that many of the public are angry, resentful and wanting policies that the government would see as being against Australia's long-term interests.

Turnbull has taken a non-populist stand this week in strongly rejecting Trump's protectionism, declaring spiritedly that whatever America might do Australia's interests lie in pursuing every opportunity to expand trade.

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But the protectionist forces are likely only to increase and become more politically dangerous, especially with Labor tempted to exploit them.

Turnbull has little political capital to bring to the task of charting his own course against surging populism, which has a grip on the Senate crossbench, and aggressive conservatism, with its tight hold on the Liberal party and sections of the media and commentariat.

To adapt a decades-old phrase of John Howard, the times simply do not suit Turnbull.

Despite it not being a federal election year, this is a hazardous one for Turnbull. He could face pressure on his leadership if the government is looking a loser as 2018 looms.

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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