

Turnbull believes in timely disclosure of donations – just not his

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

During his Wednesday appearance at the National Press Club Malcolm Turnbull observed he was not a “political animal” like some of his opponents.

He meant it as a virtue – he was extolling his pragmatism on energy policy. But he failed, to his detriment, to show a political nose on something closer to home.

Having agreed that it would be desirable to have political donations disclosed in a more timely and transparent way (and flagging he opposed foreign donations), he then refused to say how much he had given in the last campaign.

The latest donations list had come out only hours earlier but Turnbull’s contribution – speculated to be A\$1 million or \$2 million – was missing, apparently because of a timing loophole.

So it was obvious Turnbull would be asked the question, equally clear that he would be called a hypocrite if he supported a general change but took advantage of the secrecy to which he is legally entitled.

What was the point? The story, in the broad, is out there (unless the amount is much higher than suggested). The figure will presumably emerge officially in the next disclosure round – that much closer to the election. And his coyness just diverted attention from his main messages about jobs, energy, education and other parts of his 2017 agenda.

How much he kicked in for his own re-election wasn’t the only delicate point on which Turnbull would not be drawn at the Press Club.

He was notably reluctant to buy into the issue of preferences for One Nation, which is topical in the context of the March election in Western Australia. This week the [Herald Sun reported](#) there had been talks between the WA Liberals and Pauline Hanson about preference swapping.

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Asked whether he would encourage WA Premier Colin Barnett to follow the precedent of Liberal predecessor Richard Court who did not preference One Nation, Turnbull said this was a matter for the WA division and for Barnett.

Later, he was asked how Hanson's views might have evolved in the last 15 years that made her "in any way less offensive" than when John Howard put her last. And where would Hanson be on his how-to-vote cards next election? "I am not a commentator on the political evolution of One Nation," Turnbull replied.

"We deal with all of the parties in the parliament including One Nation. ... We respect every single member and senator ... All of them have been democratically elected and we seek their support on legislation."

In her first iteration, Hanson caused intense debate on the conservative side of politics about how her party should be handled. Many prominent Liberals argued passionately in terms of principle. It's not like that any more.

Second time round, Hanson has changed a little – but only a little. The Liberals seem to have changed a good deal more. We'll see what happens at the federal election on preferences but in the meantime, power is power and Hanson, with her Senate position, has quite a lot of it.

For Turnbull, despite abhorring many of her views, the relationship with Hanson and her party is all about transactions.

Just as it is with Donald Trump and his immigration crackdown – on which Turnbull keeps his thoughts to himself – and that deal to take Australia's offshore refugees.

Turnbull had the refugee agreement, done with the Obama administration, reconfirmed in his weekend phone conversation with Trump. But on Wednesday it became mired in fresh confusion and uncertainty.

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White House press secretary Sean Spicer reiterated that the deal, which he said involved some 1,250 people, had the green light, while stressing there would be “extreme vetting” of proposed settlers. But then in a clarification to the ABC the White House cast doubt on how firmly it was locked in.

The ABC [quoted a White House source](#) saying that if Trump did go ahead with the deal, it would only be because of the US’ “longstanding relationship with Australia”.

Turnbull remains publicly confident in Trump’s private assurance. The test of this confidence, and of Trump’s word, will be how many refugees from Nauru and Manus Island eventually do land on US soil after the “extreme vetting” process. We might be waiting a while before we know the answer.

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