

Turnbull's rant about Shorten a treat for the troops but will it play with the public?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

After Malcolm Turnbull called Bill Shorten a “social-climbing sycophant”, a “parasite”, and a “hypocrite” in parliament on Wednesday, Liberal Party director Tony Nutt tweeted a link, so people could watch Turnbull “tell the truth” about Shorten.

The Liberals obviously think Turnbull's extraordinary harangue will go down well with Mr and Mrs Suburbia. Victorian senator James Paterson told 2GB it was “great to see a bit of steel from the PM, I think that's exactly what the people want”.

Maybe. But it is equally possible ordinary people might see this as another example of just what they dislike about politics. Nutt has been around long enough to recall the experience of Paul Keating. Insiders loved his colourful tirades, insulting and demolishing opponents. But the voters came to hate them.

Turnbull went boots and all for the personal onslaught after Shorten attempted to move a motion against “Mr Harbourside Mansion”, claiming he was “attacking the standard of living of over a million Australian families” with an omnibus bill which includes big savings in social security as well as reform of the childcare system.

The speech was notable for its sheer quantity of sustained abuse.

“We have just heard from that great sycophant of billionaires, the leader of the opposition,” Turnbull said. “All the lectures, trying to run a politics of envy – when he was a regular dinner guest at Raheen, always there with Dick Pratt, sucking up to Dick Pratt. Did he knock back the Cristal [champagne]? I don't think so.

“There was never a union leader in Melbourne that tucked his knees under more billionaire's tables than the leader of the opposition. He lapped it up!

“He was such a sycophant, a social-climbing sycophant if ever there was one. There has never been a more sycophantic leader of the Labor Party than this one and he comes here and poses

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as a tribune of the people.

"Harbourside mansions – he's yearning for one! He is yearning to get into Kirribilli House. You know why? Because somebody else pays for it.

"Just like he loved knocking back Dick Pratt's Cristal, just as he looked forward to living in luxury at the expense of the taxpayer. This man is a parasite.

"He has no respect for the taxpayer. He has no respect for the taxpayer any more than he has respect for the members of the Australian Workers Union he betrayed again and again. He sold them out."

Quoting Shorten's words of some years ago that lowering company tax assisted job creation, Turnbull said: "I reckon he probably talked about that with Dick Pratt and Solly Lew and Lindsay Fox and all the other billionaires he liked sucking up to in Melbourne, on their corporate jets".

"Or did he give them the blast, the good attack on the rich, down with anyone that has got a quid. ... I don't think so.

"No, I think he just sucked up to them ... I think he says one thing here and another thing in the comfortable lounge rooms of Melbourne ...

"No consistency, no integrity ... This simpering sycophant. Blowing hard in the House of Representatives, sucking hard in the living rooms of Melbourne. What a hypocrite!"

Turnbull has many faces but this is not the one most people would have expected when he overthrew that aggressive verbal boxer Tony Abbott. He stood for another political style.

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So what's made him flick the switch to nasty?

He's been obviously stung by Shorten's adoption of the "Mr Harbourside mansion" handle that Peta Credlin, Abbott's former chief-of-staff, attached to him before the election. After Shorten again tossed the term out last week, he reacted angrily.

Also Turnbull must be seriously discombobulated by a dreadful start to the year, including [this week's bad Newspann](#) followed by the defection of Cory Bernardi to set up a conservative party.

Turnbull knows his followers are uneasy. Nothing like a red meat speech, delivered with his superior barrister's skill, to provide them with a short-term adrenaline rush.

But closer to the interests of the average voters than Wednesday's hyperbole around it will be the [actual measures in the omnibus bill](#), which includes a reworking of certain earlier initiatives in an effort to massage them through the Senate. A lot of people stand to be affected, positively or negatively, by the content of this enormous bill.

The childcare reforms, designed to boost workforce participation, are as they were proposed previously. The government says the changes would give about 1 million families "relief from out-of-pocket child care cost pressures" and "encourage more than 230,000 families to increase their involvement in paid employment".

Also in the bill are savings of more than A\$5.5 billion, including changes to the family tax benefit (FTB) system and to paid parental leave provisions.

But the government has softened its proposals in both these areas, to accommodate crossbench senators.

Thus, while it still would phase out FTB end-of-year supplements, it would double to \$20 the

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maximum fortnightly payment rates of FTB Part A. It has also abandoned its planned scaling back of FTB Part B for children between 13 and 16.

And it will increase from 18 to 20 the maximum number of weeks the government's paid parental leave scheme provides.

The concessions will reduce the savings the government would originally have got by about \$2.4 billion.

But as "cameos" flew from government and opposition about how individual families would be affected, Shorten said that "the prime minister is taking \$2.7 billion from Australian families and yet he proposes giving \$7.4 billion to big banks in tax giveaways".

"We draw a line in the sand on this \$2.7 billion cut to family payments. We are not buying it and the Australian people are not buying it," he told parliament.

The omnibus legislation also includes other leftovers from past attempts to tighten social security, among them various pension-related savings and the four-week waiting period for unemployed young people seeking income support payments.

The government seems confident it has a set of measures it can "land" in parliament. But there will likely be more trade-offs required for that to happen, amid a good deal of noise from those who stand to lose.

The package will need better salesmanship than on Wednesday, when the mass of detail had it struggling to be understood – and then it was overshadowed by the Turnbull rant.

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