

Whether it's the awkward politics of preferences for One Nation or the extremely complex policy conundrum of improving Australia's energy security, the Turnbull government's default position is to attack Labor.

As it becomes clear the West Australian Liberals' preferencing of One Nation is likely to be the start of something wider, ministers on Monday conveniently fixed on the ALP preferencing the Greens, painting that party as a bigger boggy than the reincarnated and now apparently more "sophisticated" and "mature" One Nation.

Trade Minister Steve Ciobo, hitting back at Bill Shorten's criticism of the WA deal, described the Greens "as one of the most, if not the most extreme political party in modern Australian politics" with "kooky ideas".

Treasurer Scott Morrison said: "Can I tell you about the deal that I am concerned about? I'm concerned about the deal between Labor and the Greens. This is a political deal that goes on election after election after election."

And then, in a neat segue to the energy blame game that the government has run for months, he added: "That's a deal that is forcing the Labor Party further and further and further to the ideological driven energy policies that they are foisting on the Australian people."

Morrison appeared notably unimpressed with [Monday's call from 18 groups](#), ranging through peak business lobbies and energy users and suppliers to environmental and welfare bodies, for politicians to "stop partisan antics" and work together on reforming the energy system.

"Well, Australia doesn't need lowest common denominator solutions. We need the right solutions to these challenges," the Treasurer said.

"I mean, if the argument is we've got to reduce the policy effectiveness down to a level where it

is fairly meaningless, so at least people won't engage in heated conversation, I don't think that's why the Australian people sent us here."

But, as the support for One Nation and other protest players is showing, the major parties at present don't seem, in the public's eyes, to be doing what they were sent to do.

Morrison's dismissive attitude to the plea for a more co-operative approach is the sort of arrogance that alienates voters. This is especially so as, given the breadth of representation, the groups couldn't be written off as what the government might call the "usual suspects".

Obviously in a policy debate as central as energy security the exchanges between the Coalition and Labor, and the federal government and Labor states, will be robust.

Partisanship is inevitable - there will be genuine differences about the best policy course, as well as the pursuit of votes. But it is a matter of degree. There is a distinction between a strong contest of views and shouty "hyper-partisan" abuse. We've had far too much of the latter from the Coalition, and some from Labor, in the energy debate.

While government and opposition will disagree on whatever the Coalition finally unveils it is important, if we are to encourage future investment, that the gap is neither excessively wide nor over-stated for political expediency.

The likely eventual shape of the Turnbull energy policy remains obscure. Turnbull says he is technology-neutral, in the pursuit of an approach that deals with the challenges of increasing reliance on renewables, with their intermittent nature, the phase-out of old coal-fired power stations, and an energy market presently operating inadequately.

The Prime Minister has raised the prospect of new "clean coal" generators - despite the fact investors don't want to go into coal - that would perhaps be encouraged by government assistance. He has started canvassing pumped hydro. Morrison attracted maximum publicity by brandishing a lump of coal in the House. "What I did the other day was literally put coal back on the table," he said on Monday.

None of this amounts to a policy.

The government presumably thinks there are votes in running the energy argument at maximum partisan volume. But you can't help wondering if there is something more behind Turnbull's turning up the level. Is there an element of over-compensation for 2009, when his pursuit of bipartisanship on an emission trading scheme triggered the loss of his leadership?

In seeking a viable policy Turnbull is operating under the constraints imposed by those on his own side. That was why he so quickly had to rule out an emissions intensity scheme, despite the encouragement for such a scheme given late last year in the preliminary report of the Finkel inquiry into energy security.

Turnbull has to deal with conservative Liberals sceptical of climate change and renewables, and powerful Nationals promoting the coal industry.

He condemns Labor for having an "ideological" attitude to energy policy and contrasts it with what he says is his own pragmatic one. But he leaves an important element out of that narrative – that is, the ideologues tying his hands.

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