

Grattan on Friday: Malcolm Turnbull's government has finally defied fiction

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



With the eligibility of the Nationals' leadership under question, Malcolm Turnbull has had a nightmarish week. Mick Tsikas/AAP

In a week belonging more appropriately to Shaun Micallef comedy than parliamentary reality, it's arguable Pauline Hanson's [burqa stunt](#) wasn't the most extraordinary thing that happened in Canberra.

Hanson has extreme beliefs and therefore it mightn't be so surprising – though it is appalling – that she's willing to use the parliament as a stage for extremely bad behaviour.

In donning the burqa purchased on eBay and entering the Senate chamber, she was as attention-seeking as the streaker who races naked across the football ground, though her motive was darker. Let's call out her action, but not play into her cynical pursuit of mega publicity.

Entirely beyond imagination was the week being bookended by the Nationals leader, [Barnaby Joyce](#), and his deputy, senator [Fiona Nash](#), standing up in their respective houses to announce they were dual citizens (he a Kiwi, she a Brit).

Joyce and Nash are remaining in cabinet – unlike their Nationals colleague [Matt Canavan](#) – and in their leadership roles while the High Court determines the fate of all three, among the batch of cases involving dual citizenship. At issue is their eligibility under the Constitution's Section 44, which bans dual nationals standing for parliament.

Australian Conservatives' senator Cory Bernardi, formerly a Liberal, [suggested on Thursday](#) that parliament should be [prorogued](#)

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– that is, suspended – until citizenship questions and any subsequent byelections are sorted.

But suspending parliament would disrupt the normal course of government business, delaying legislation and, crucially in political terms, signalling panic.

Joyce continues to participate in parliamentary votes, so the government retains its one-seat majority in the House of Representatives. By its own lights, what credible story could it advance to put parliament on hold? It would look the ultimate in desperation.

There is no doubt the Joyce affair presented the government with a crisis. It then became a matter of management and this was seriously bungled.

Once it took the decision to keep Joyce in cabinet and in the deputy prime ministership, the government was always destined to be vulnerable to a ferocious Labor attack.

But its shock and awe response, with the absurd notion of a “treacherous” Bill Shorten and a Labor [conspiracy across the Tasman](#) with New Zealand Labour, was deluded from the start.

First, it was a try-on. Both Labor here and Labour in NZ were somewhat apologetic for their roles in the affair, understandable at least for NZ Labour which is facing an election. But what exactly was the wrongdoing by Labor here? Is there anything inherently “treacherous” about a Labor staffer using contacts to check in NZ who is eligible to be a citizen of that country?

Second the tactic, played in stereo, opened the government to ridicule. In particular, her exaggerated performance raised questions about the judgement of the usually astute Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, just days after a [laudatory article](#) had asked why she wasn't mentioned more often as a possible future leader.

Although the circumstances are different, the hyperbolic accusation of “treachery” carries a remote echo from Turnbull's book *The Spy Catcher Trial*, about the British government's

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attempt to stop the Australian publication of a book by a former UK intelligence officer.

Turnbull, whose successful appearance in the high profile case gave an early boost to his reputation, wrote that then UK opposition leader Neil Kinnock – whom he pressed to “humiliate” the UK attorney-general in the British parliament – “was vigorously attacked in the House of Commons for ‘treacherous’ conduct”, in discussing the case with him.

If Turnbull were prone to bad dreams, his nightmares for the next few months would go something like this.

The government would lose the High Court case challenging the postal ballot on same-sex marriage, or win it and the ballot would return a “no” result.

It would lose Joyce’s citizenship case – and Nash and Canavan would be knocked out as well.

It would then lose the byelection in Joyce’s New England seat, with goodness knows what consequences in the resulting hung parliament.

Oh, and there would be a bruising battle within the government over energy policy, resulting in a much-criticised, wishy-washy outcome that gave no certainty for future investment.

But Turnbull is an optimist, or so he always tells us, and he’ll be looking at how things could all work out for the best in the best of worlds.

He’s predicted in the most unequivocal terms that Joyce will be vindicated in the High Court.

If things went well, the postal vote would sail through the legal challenge, and return a yes vote by a convincing margin with a substantial turnout, making the ballot beyond reasonable

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reproach, whatever the gripes of the losers. That would lead to parliament changing the law to deliver same-sex marriage by Christmas.

Energy policy would be hard fought within the government's ranks, but the resulting compromise would be one that was seen as credible and welcomed by business.

The optimistic scenario – we might as well include in it at least one 50-50 Newspoll – would leave the government with a hope of regrouping, after an end-of-year ministerial reshuffle.

Which scenario, or what mixture of them, will come to pass is unforeseeable. But given how life goes for this government, some might regard the prospects for anything like the optimistic one as being in near-miracle territory.

Meanwhile, things are presently so grim they recall vividly some of the blackest times of the Gillard government.

Monday's Joyce bombshell drove the same-sex marriage battle somewhat into the background, while both sides gear up for intense campaigns and questions remain about the postal ballot.

One of these is, I think, particularly interesting – that is, the argument that the result won't be a true one because young people especially will be under-represented. The young are, collectively, more in favour of same-sex marriage than older people but less likely to be on the roll, to have a fixed address, or to be familiar with the post.

While this is a problem, I will be a bit contrarian. I think this both demeans the young and lets them off too lightly. They are supposed to enrol for elections anyway; if they have a view on the marriage issue there is both the incentive and opportunity to do so for this ballot.

A week is left – the rolls close August 24. The mobility challenge applies for general elections – it's a hassle, but not insurmountable.

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As for not using the post – well, that is like saying older people weren't brought up with computers. Sorry, but one has to move with the times – even if, in this case, it's moving backwards.

Young people are highly savvy with technology – I just don't accept they can't come to grips with posting a letter. If in doubt, they can always ask their grandmothers.

The nation is considering an important social issue – young Australians should [get on the roll](#) and vote.

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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