

Abbott's disruption is raising the question: where will it end?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



Tony Abbott has reportedly threatened to cross the floor if there is any attempt to legislate a clean energy target. Mick Tsikas/AAP

Even in today's often bizarre political environment, Tuesday night's encounter between Tony Abbott, Peta Credlin and Alan Jones on Sky News was surreal.

Credlin, Abbott's former chief-of-staff, now works for Sky, where she more often than not is a sharp critic of the Turnbull government. Jones, a highly opinionated voice on 2GB who has a weekly Sky program, spruiks for the former prime minister's return to the leadership. Abbott is running a jihad against renewables, increasing the pressure on Malcolm Turnbull as the government struggles to bring together an energy policy.

It was a cosy threesome, and the off-air chit-chat would have been gold.

Among the on-air gems was Credlin asking Abbott whether he trusted Turnbull, because "you know and I know what happened in 2009". What they both knew, according to Credlin, was that Turnbull ordered one line to be taken in negotiations over an emissions trading scheme while "telling the partyroom something completely different".

Credlin wondered: "Do you trust the prime minister is going to do the right thing or is he going to sign you up to a clean energy target without proper debate?"

Abbott said the important thing was that the decision would have to go through the partyroom where there are "extremely serious reservations about this clean energy target".

Abbott has poked and prodded at Turnbull on a range of fronts for two years, steadily raising the heat in recent months.

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Now his disruption has reached a new level – so much so that one wonders how it can go on without coming to a blow up.

Constantly out in the public arena, Abbott currently is upping the ante over energy policy, and campaigning hard for a No vote in the same-sex marriage postal ballot.

On the latter Turnbull, a strong Yes advocate but leading a government split on the question, is in the hands of those who chose to vote in the voluntary “survey”. On the former, he’s ultimately in the partyroom’s hands. On both issues, these are uncomfortable and risky places to be.

Abbott’s onslaught against renewables is more than just disgruntlement from a man deposed. It’s a well-honed attack. Just like the one he and others mounted against Turnbull in 2009 over carbon pricing, which triggered Turnbull’s fall as leader and Abbott’s (unexpected) ascension.

Liberals still don’t think Abbott could recapture the prime ministership. But his power to harm an embattled Turnbull is enormous.

He is working on fertile ground in the energy area. A sizeable section of the Coalition is deeply antipathetic to renewables.

The Nationals’ federal conference [recently called](#) for the renewables’ subsidies to be phased out.

Turnbull initially seemed enthusiastic about Chief Scientist Alan Finkel’s clean energy target, although he always made it clear a policy based on it must include clean coal.

But he has stepped further and further towards playing up the role of coal, to the point of his face-off with AGL over its determination to close its Liddell power station.

In his comments, Abbott notes Turnbull's greater emphasis on coal, saying – with a touch of condescension – that he thinks Turnbull has “got the message” which is to his “credit”.

But Abbott has put the bar as high as possible. It's not just a matter of allowing coal into the clean energy target – a target mustn't be countenanced. “It would be unconscionable – I underline that word – unconscionable for a government that was originally elected promising to abolish the carbon tax and to end Labor's climate obsessions to go further down this renewable path.”

In that one sentence Abbott seeks to own energy policy, both past and future.

The Australian on Wednesday [reported](#) that Abbott has threatened to cross the floor if there is any attempt to legislate a clean energy target, and would likely be followed by others. He wrote in an [opinion piece for the paper](#) that “the Liberal and National backbench might need to save the government from itself”.

He is inciting the followers to constrain their leader before or, at the extreme, after the decisions on energy policy are made. Usually, the decision-making flows downward, from the prime minister and the cabinet to a backbench that is consulted but basically told what will be done.

It's nearly impossible for Turnbull and ministers to handle the rampaging backbencher. They try to dodge and weave. “I don't think a former prime minister is going to move to put a Labor government into power,” Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said on Wednesday.

It's counterproductive for them to get into a slanging match with Abbott, not least because the policy formulation still seems to be in shifting sands and also because they don't want to agitate an already touchy backbench.

If Turnbull and the government embrace a clean energy target the danger is that Abbott might indeed be able to foment a revolt which, depending on the outcome, could be humiliating, or a lot worse, for Turnbull.

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To the extent that Turnbull is forced to gesture to the Abbott line in the decisions made, Abbott will claim the credit.

But the more Abbott's anti-renewables position can get traction, the worse the policy problem for the government. Turnbull may ensure coal has some prominence in the long-term policy mix but if the government were perceived to be turning against renewables, a growing industry would be set back, causing further investment chaos.

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