

Abbott and Turnbull shape up for another round of an old battle

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Coalition party room on Tuesday is set for a high stakes, quite personal battle between Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull over the National Energy Guarantee, with former and current prime ministers shaping up on Monday.

In an all-out attack ahead of the crucial meeting, Abbott denounced the NEG as “seriously bad policy”, declaring “its complete focus is on reducing emissions”. He [told](#) 2GB it would put prices up rather than down, and the modelling was “entirely fanciful”. Legislating the 26% emissions reduction target was very dangerous, he said.

In parliament, responding to an Opposition question about Abbott’s ridiculing claims of lower power prices under the NEG, Turnbull pointed to “what happens when you allow ideology and idiocy to take charge of energy policy”. But he backed his barb by citing the safe example of South Australia under Labor.

Abbott [returned](#) to the fray on the ABC’s 7.30 – his first appearance on the program since he lost the leadership. Asked about Turnbull’s “idiocy” line, he said, “Well, idiocy is doing more of the same and expecting a different result.

“We have massively increased renewables and what have we got? We have a doubling of price. We’ve got blackouts and rationing now routine. If you want to increase renewables even more, that is to say unreliable power, from the current 17% to 36% [under the NEG], we are going to get more of the same”.

He said the energy decision “is by far the most important issue that the government confronts because this will shape our economy, this will determine our prosperity and the kind of industries we have for decades to come.”

Both Abbott and former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce have flagged they could cross the floor on the emissions reduction legislation.

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Joyce said on Monday: “People in the Kmart, people in the local pub, they don’t care about the Paris agreement. It means nothing to them. It has no purpose.

“What matters to them is this: that they can be able to afford their power bills and they currently cannot. It’s not about power prices staying where they are. They are too high. They’ve got to go down.”

Turnbull and Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg are confident of having support for the NEG in the party room, which will have before it the emissions reduction legislation. (This is the only part of the plan requiring federal legislation. The rest comes under state legislation.)

But how many critics speak out, and whether MPs reserve their right to cross the floor, will be important in political terms to whether Turnbull is set back or Abbott is embarrassed.

Tuesday’s clash is just the latest sortie in the decade-long “climate war” between Turnbull and Abbott. Abbott has made energy policy one of his key points of attack on the Turnbull government, and has progressively ramped up his criticism, which culminated in his call for Australia to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement.

The Coalition meeting is to be followed by a phone hook up between Frydenberg and the state energy ministers, ahead of the release for consultation of the draft state legislation for the NEG mechanism.

While the federal legislation before the party room covers only the emissions reduction target the discussion will range over the full scheme.

In careful preparation for Tuesday’s debate Turnbull and Frydenberg met the backbench energy committee to Monday night.

Earlier the Nationals were briefed by the chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer

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Commissions, Rod Sims.

Some Nationals have been mollified by the proposal from the ACCC – which has been received favourably by the government - that the government underwrite the cost of new dispatchable electricity generation, to make it easier for such projects to gain finance.

The recommendation is that this would apply only to new owners rather than present operators. The ACCC proposal is technology-neutral but the coal-advocates see it facilitating new investment in coal.

Resources Minister Matt Canavan, from the Nationals, told Sky News “A lot of my colleagues have expressed support for [the ACCC recommendation] so we’ll work together as a government in response to this report ... we’re certainly willing to do what we can to attract more investment in our energy sector and more investment will mean more supply power.”

But Abbott is sceptical at the government’s nod to the proposal.

“Frankly I think this is a last minute concession to try to get a dodgy policy through the party room”, he said on 2GB.

Abbott said putting the emissions target – which he set while prime minister – into legislation was a “very, very dangerous move”. When his cabinet had agreed to the 26-28% emissions reduction target, this was non-binding, he said.

“There’s a world of difference between a non-binding target and a mandatory legislative commitment,” he said.

“I have enormous concerns about anything that smacks of our country being dictated to, surrendering our sovereignty really, to the green bureaucrats of Paris by legislatively making mandatory what was previously only a voluntary guideline, a voluntary target”.

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UPDATE

At Monday night's backbench committee meeting a vote on the legislation was taken. Of ten eligible voting members, seven were in favour, two wanted more information and one - Tony Abbott - voted against. The meeting was attended by about 30.

Sources said later that several MPs might reserve their position on the legislation at Tuesday's party meeting.

Barnaby Joyce was among those attending the meeting but was not eligible to vote.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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