

## Federal election 2016: come out, Malcolm, wherever you are

Greg Sheridan, The Australian, May 24, 2016

One of the campaign's key mini-battles is to define the real Malcolm Turnbull — but he is allowing his enemies to do so.

Fairfax columnists lament the eclipse of the soft and cuddly Malcolm, who advocates gay marriage and radical action on climate change, champions the republic and thinks terrorism is overrated as a threat, who evinces great unease about mandatory detention and boat turnbacks.

Labor chimes in: yes, that's the real Malcolm, but he's turned his back on his true self to appease dark forces of Abbott reaction.

Fairfax's Peter Hartcher argued at the weekend that in earning Tony Abbott's endorsement, the Prime Minister had lost the electorate. Though Hartcher is a fine journalist, that analysis is 100 per cent wrong.

In 2013, people showed they would vote in huge numbers for a tough border policy, the promise of political stability and an end to the carbon tax, despite Abbott being not particularly popular. A popular leader like Turnbull, selling core Liberal policies the electorate has endorsed, should be a huge winner. After all, if voters wanted climate alarmism, a carbon tax under whatever name, strong commitment on gay marriage and moral unease about borders, they would vote Labor.

The problem is Turnbull, for whatever reason, just doesn't prosecute some of the big, vote-winning issues for the Coalition. This partly reflects the oddity of his position before he was PM. Although a senior cabinet minister, he did not participate in the government's key political arguments on the economy or national security. On many social issues he seemed to give a wink and a sigh, suggesting he was really on the other side while not explicitly opposing Liberal policy. But as Turnbull points out, he was a member of the Abbott cabinet. He has kept the Abbott government's policies on the economy and national security.

The problem is he won't argue strongly for them. It's as if he was seduced by the ludicrous, beatific commentary that greeted his ascension to PM. The luvvies of the Left loved him and he doesn't want to spurn them too forcefully.

But in the end, he leads a centre-right party.

Any idea the real Malcolm will emerge if he wins is nonsense; the strength of his authority in a government with a reduced majority will be very problematic. Meanwhile, he should stop ignoring vote winners. His silence on national security is bizarre.

People will vote against the danger of Labor bringing back the boats, but even when Turnbull addresses this issue, he sounds so unconvinced of his arguments that it lacks cut-through.

Turnbull suffers stylistically not from association with Abbott but a determination not to be like Abbott.

In office, Abbott spoke too often in three-word slogans, as though he were in an election campaign. But in a campaign context these slogans cut through.

Let Turnbull be Turnbull by all means, but that Turnbull must be the leader of the centre-right party, campaigning on core issues of national security.