

Tony Abbott makes pitch for recall to the cabinet with free advice to Malcolm Turnbull



Former prime minister Tony Abbott during Question Time last week. Photo: AAP

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Tony Abbott has made his strongest pitch yet for a recall to the cabinet and passed on some free advice to Malcolm Turnbull, urging him to double down on the budget repair task and take up the attack to Labor's 50 per cent renewable energy target. Framing his possible return to the ministry as a symbol of party unity, the former Prime Minister said the party room wanted to see a "united and cohesive government" and argued the last thing it wanted was "anything that was destabilising."

Mr Abbott also said he had learnt from past mistakes – nominating several errors committed under his government – while arguing he possessed the capacity to again establish an effective working relationship with Mr Turnbull. "You don't have to idolise someone to be able to work with them. Peter Costello and John Howard sometimes had difficult moments, but they worked very effectively together," he said. "I am expecting Malcolm Turnbull to lead our party to the election because the last thing anyone in the Coalition wants is a revolving door Prime Ministership. "Obviously, there were some mistakes that the Abbott government made. One mistake that we made, we abolished the debt ceiling in late 2013... We imagined that the Senate would be better from July 2014 than it turned out to be. So that was a mistake.

"I suspect that there were one or two decisions that I made with insufficient consultation which I should not have made or I should have had more consultation beforehand. I could have been a little smoother in managing some of my colleagues at times. I think I should have done more long-form interviews."

Advice for Turnbull

Speaking on Sky News, Mr Abbott said that his possible return to cabinet was a decision for Mr Turnbull but made clear he would continue to use his freedom as a backbencher to speak out on a range of issues. "While I'm on the back bench, obviously, I have the full freedom to speak out on the issues I think are important. And I'm going to make the most of that freedom," he said. "I guess it's an issue for him whether I am or am not one of the 23 members of the party room most qualified to be in cabinet."

Mr Abbott urged Mr Turnbull to focus more of his efforts on the budget repair task which he began in the unpopular 2014 budget, arguing for tougher measures to ensure there was no loss of Australia's AAA credit rating.

"There needs to be a big new push on budget repair," Mr Abbott said. "If we don't get the budget better we are ripping-off our children and our grandchildren. It's a form of inter-generational theft. "I think we need to have another look at some of the issues from the 2014 budget because we can't go on indulging in what I used to describe as a cash splash with borrowed money."

Mr Abbott said the budget surplus should be achieved through spending restraint rather than higher taxes, arguing this could be used to sharpen differences between the Liberal and Labor sides of politics. "This should be a fundamental distinction between the two sides of politics," he said. "At the very least, we need to have an absolute opposition to new spending which isn't absolutely essential."

Mr Abbott warned the loss of the AAA credit rating would hand a huge political opportunity to Bill Shorten and held out hope he mid year economic review would go some way to ensuring there was no downgrade. "Let's hope that actions taken in MYEFO and in next year's budget can keep the AAA rating," he said. "Obviously, (losing the rating) will provide the Opposition with a bit of a turkey shoot and that's the last thing that any government would want."

Mr Abbott said Mr Shorten's 50 per cent renewable energy target could be turned into a major political negative for Labor if the Coalition was prepared to aggressively campaign on the issue in the wake of the South Australian state-wide blackout. "This would be a very good way to crystallise the differences between the Labor Party and the Coalition. We want lower power prices. Labor wants higher power prices," he said.

"This idea that government policy should be moving from coal which costs \$50 per megawatt hour to renewables which costs on average \$100 per megawatt hour – well it doesn't make sense frankly. And yet that's Labor's stated policy. That's become, if you like, a theological conviction from Labor right now."

Mr Abbott said the fact that South Australia had the lights go out for 24 hours was a "foretaste of things to come if Labor has its way" and argued that Mr Turnbull could transform into a conviction politician to take the fight to Mr Shorten on renewable energy.

Criticism of the Senate

Mr Abbott also took aim at the Senate, suggesting it had now become a problem at the heart of Australia's democratic system in terms of its intransigence. "We've got a Senate where individual Senators think that their particular mandate trumps that of the government as a whole. Now this is a real problem for our country and it didn't operate to anything like the same extent in the Howard era," Mr Abbott said. "Imagine if the 1996 budget savings had been blocked in the Senate. Imagine if the 1996 and 1997 workplace relations legislation had been blocked in the Senate. Imagine if the GST legislation had been blocked in the Senate.

"Now, sure the workplace bills were amended and the GST was amended, but, in the end, the Senate in those days accepted that the government had to be allowed to govern."

"That's not the case today. We've got an absolutely intransigent Labor Party... and you've got individual Senators who say that their pet issue trumps every other issue and the Senate will deal with nothing until it deals with their pet issue." Mr Abbott said this was recipe for bad government and was sabotaging the nation's future. He suggested there were options to try and break the difficulties with the Senate like the power for governments to be able to bring on joint sittings without the need of resorting to an election.

"One of our long term objectives has got to be to make our system work better," he said.

Abbott on Trump

Discussing the meaning of the success of Donald Trump in the US election, Mr Abbott said the victory showed that politicians had, for too long, been seen to have neglected the needs and interests of the public.

He warned there were similar factors at work within an Australian context and a sense that people believed that politicians had stopped listening to them. "In the end, what the public are concerned about are their jobs, their standard of living, whether they can afford a house and are their communities and is their country safe? And so often we look like we're being distracted from that," he said. "Are we going to get a sort of populist outsider lead our country? No. I don't believe that's likely at all because our system is different. But nevertheless similar factors are at work and it's very important that our political system respects the people who in the end it is designed to serve."

He said the rise of new forces on the political Right like Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party needed to be met with a strong representation of centre-right values by the government. "If we lack a strong centre right party, you'll get people on the fringes come to the fore," he said. "What the government needs to do is not to overreact to Hanson but to get on with the job of being a strong and sensible centre right government."

"Be firm in articulating centre right values and that will minimise the risk from the Right."

Parting shot

In a backhand to some of the issues elevated by Mr Turnbull as Prime Minister, Mr Abbott warned the focus on innovation was not a vote a winner and had failed to show a responsiveness to the interests and needs of ordinary Australians. "It's good that we're no longer talking about innovation and agility because that, frankly, it loses people," he said.

“We’ve got to talk about the issues that they understand. And we’ve got to put it in terms of their interests and how we’re going to advance their interests.”