

EDITORIALS

## **Aspiring to greater heights in crucial policy contests**

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Malcolm Turnbull and the Coalition went on the attack in parliament yesterday over their core political value of aspiration. They had been provided with an opening by deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek, who had told Sky News that “honestly this aspiration term, it mystifies me” as she defended her party’s opposition to the Coalition’s three-stage income tax reduction plan. It wasn’t long ago, of course, that Labor’s Paul Keating, as prime minister, used to talk about “aspirational” Australians while delivering policies and making arguments designed to support and encourage them. So Ms Plibersek’s clumsy phrase allowed the Prime Minister to highlight how under Bill Shorten the ALP was regressing to an old-fashioned and crude politics of envy.

Mr Turnbull backed this up with a full-throated personal attack on the Opposition Leader, repeating an earlier characterisation of him as a sycophant to billionaire supporters such as trucking magnate Lindsay Fox and the late packaging mogul Dick Pratt. Here was robust political aggression from the government, targeting Labor for abandoning aspiration while sucking up to the rich. But the question for the Coalition is whether it is cutting through often enough on the major issues and why, given its policy and performance advantage on crucial issues, it seems to be failing in efforts to convince voters of its merit.

Behind the scenes yesterday a joint meeting of Liberal and Nationals MPs struggled again with the vexed issue of climate and energy policy that has periodically torn the Coalition apart. Once more a proposed mechanism to meet emissions reduction targets while underpinning energy supply is generating dissent and division inside the Liberal Party. Almost a decade after Tony Abbott challenged and defeated Mr Turnbull as opposition leader over whether to support the Rudd Labor government’s emissions trading scheme, Mr Abbott is likening Mr Turnbull’s national energy guarantee to a carbon tax and rallying colleagues to move against it. He is right to be concerned because two of the NEG objectives — reducing costs and increasing reliability — are in direct conflict with the other driving objective, reducing emissions.

The devil will be in the detail, but unless the NEG settings can be seen to drive down electricity prices and encourage investment in baseload generation, they will create more dissent within the Coalition and struggle to win support from the electorate. This conflict between climate change commitments and energy

prices provided a surge that the Coalition rode into government in 2013. Labor's promise of higher emissions targets and a national 50 per cent renewable energy target would be disastrous; yet rather than accentuate this policy difference, the Coalition is trying to win bipartisan backing for the NEG. Policy differentiation on a fundamental issue goes begging.

Likewise, even on border protection our latest Newspoll survey shows voter preference for the Coalition's approach has fallen below 50 per cent to its lowest level for eight years, with almost a third of voters favouring Labor on the issue. After stopping the boats and fixing a dire dilemma that Labor said could not be resolved, the Coalition should be unassailable on this issue, especially given it is resettling refugees in the US and Labor dissenters are constantly agitating to weaken ALP policies in a way that would risk yet another descent into chaos, trauma and tragedy. Mr Turnbull and his team made very little, if anything, of its strong policy advantage over Labor on border protection, energy prices and lower taxes during the 2016 election campaign. Their desire to emphasise only their positive agenda let Labor off the hook. They cannot afford to do that again, nor can they try to fatten the pig on market day or leave the negative comparison for paid advertising. The government must make its case and highlight the risk of Labor daily and robustly. We see far too little urgency and vigour in its advocacy. If it fails in this task, then fails at the election, the policy differences we already know of will deliver inevitable consequences for Australian voters — higher taxes, more increases in power prices and the risk of weakened border protection measures. These are high stakes.

In coming days the contest will focus on income tax plans, with Labor now prepared to block the entire package if the immediate cuts for lower-income workers are not split into a discrete bill. This will be a crucial parliamentary play and could fuel the class warfare debate right through to the election, whether it comes this year or next. Yes, voters are aspirational for their own financial situation and for their families. The Coalition needs to demonstrate it is attuned to these aspirations and is prepared to deliver the policies and make the tough arguments that can encourage them. This should always be the theme driving economic policy. Yet there is an alarming torpor about the Coalition's efforts. In its policy framing and political rhetoric, the government must aspire to greater heights.