

WORKING TITLE: The Liberal's own climate wars

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Australian policy debate is like a drunken mob looking for a spilt pint to fight over. Even before South Australia's lights came back on the culture warriors were out blaming wind turbines for causing storms. Who cares that cyclonic winds knocked down an unprecedented 20 transmission towers, the instant experts in the Australian commentariat could "feel" that renewable energy was at fault.

Adding to the tension is the fact that the Coalition is in the middle of a cold war over climate policy. Malcolm Turnbull has lost the Liberal leadership over climate policy before and his opponents are keen to trip him up on it again. While the clear evidence that climate change is already occurring has made denouncing climate science a bit embarrassing, the same folk who once cited Lord Monkton and talked endlessly about solar flares now talk endlessly about "grid stability".

Poor Malcolm Turnbull is, once again, stuck in the middle; crushed between the chanting mob that wants to smash supporters of renewables and the overwhelming evidence that Australia needs more renewable energy, not less. The PM knows that there is no way to reduce greenhouse emissions without more renewables, and he also knows that that is why his internal enemies are suddenly feigning concern with the design of transmission architecture and the impact of load shedding on frequency stability.

Embarrassingly for those who think the "obsession" with renewable energy is a left-wing phenomena, the ACT Liberals claim they are committed to a 100 per cent renewable energy target for Canberra. Whoops.

Strangely mute

The ACT goes to the polls in less than two weeks. What better time for a centrist Prime Minister to burst onto the local campaign? What better time to clear up whether he thinks the ACT Liberals' support for the ALP's plan for 100 per cent renewable energy is visionary or vapid? Of course, the reality could be that the local Liberals are not genuinely committed to the 100 per cent target as they have been strangely mute since the national debate erupted.

But it is not just renewables that make any prime ministerial intervention in the ACT election problematic. The ACT Liberals have planted a few other land mines as well. Way back in 2015, when Mr Turnbull was keen to put all tax reform options on the table, he spoke enthusiastically about the need to scrap inefficient "stamp duties" and introduce a coherent land-tax regime.

The ACT Labor government was taking the same advice as Mr Turnbull and has introduced exactly the scheme he was encouraging state leaders to adopt. Needless to say the local Liberals have fought the land tax change tooth and nail. And needless to say the Prime Minister is yet to either repudiate the populism of his local branch or congratulate ACT Labor for implementing genuine tax reform.

Last year the Prime Minister was also big on the link between the liveability of our cities and the productivity of our economy. But in the ACT, where the ALP government is building light rail and the local Liberals are promising to rip up the contracts, the PM is as visible as his party's position is coherent.

Contest of ideas

When politics is a contest of ideas a democracy has some chance of lifting itself up as each new political fight helps to either refine an old policy position or open up new challenges or opportunities. But when politics is simply a contest of tribal chanting in which the rules of evidence and the principles of consistency are abandoned for short-term tactical advantage then progress, be it economic or democratic, becomes purely coincidental. Put simply, honest political fights are constructive, phoney political fights are destructive.

So what will Malcolm Turnbull do in the lead-up to the ACT election? Will he repudiate the Canberra Liberals' support for 100 per cent renewable energy in order to appease the climate sceptics in his Federal Coalition? Will he repudiate the ACT Liberals for their position on land tax and public transport in order to legitimise his national push for more of both? Or will he simply keep his head down until the latest brawl is over?

Dragging a country in a new direction takes strength, patience and, above all, consistency. Flip flopping and strategic silence are great tactics for political survival and terrible strategies for political leadership. In the two weeks between now and the ACT election Mr Turnbull will signal which approach he is committed to.

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