



18c Decision Could Mark The End Of The Beginning For PM Malcolm Turnbull

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We might soon be approaching the end of the beginning of Malcolm Turnbull's prime ministership.

A harsh critic of his government might argue that since the federal election in July last year the government has meandered through policy and lacked a clear definition of its purpose.

If the leader doesn't know, or doesn't explain what they stand for, voters can't be expected to know either. And the situation is made worse if those things the leader is perceived to stand for are not in substance very different from what their political opponents say they also stand for.

Slowly, but noticeably, things are beginning to change. On industrial relations, on fiscal management, and now this week on freedom of speech the Turnbull government is starting to develop a clear picture of what it stands for and position itself as different from Labor.

Importantly it is attempting to frame the debate around values. The government hasn't completely succeeded yet, but at least it is trying. On industrial relations, for example, the Coalition presents a



picture of a Labor Party in thrall to a militant union movement that regards itself above the law, in contrast to a government that believes in the dignity of work and which therefore won't stand in the way of a cut to penalty rates adjudicated by an independent umpire.

The biggest issue on which the government is still struggling is energy. Try as it might it simply can't convince the public that the Coalition's renewable energy target of 23.5 per cent by 2020 is responsible and affordable, while the ALP's target of 50 per cent by 2030 is irresponsible and unaffordable.

Turnbull's plan to reform section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act is significant for a number of reasons.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

At a practical level, it substantially defangs a dangerous and insidious piece of legislation that's operated to censor political debate in this country. Full repeal would have been better, and there's no doubt that ultimately section 18C will be repealed in its entirety. Nevertheless, the PM has made a good start towards restoring freedom of speech in Australia and he should be congratulated.

At the level of internal party politics has bolstered his standing with his backbench and with rank-and-file party Liberal Party members. They think Turnbull has given them an issue of principle to fight for, and they're right, he has. On Tuesday morning when the amendments to section 18C were presented to a meeting of Coalition MPs and senators for approval the reforms were overwhelmingly supported. Out of more than 100 MPs and senators in the room, a small handful offered perfunctory objections not on their substance, but because they feared Labor and the Greens' campaign against the reforms.

It's certainly true there's left-wing opposition to changing section 18C, but if the Coalition refused to act against the manifest injustice and illiberalism of the law for fear of what its opponents would do the Coalition would end up only ever doing what their opponents agreed to.

The alternative position taken by the cabinet and the vast majority of the backbench is that the Coalition should stand up for what it believes in, argue its case, and win the battle of ideas. And in the battle of ideas, there's no bigger battle than the battle for freedom of speech.

The reason why so many commentators persist with the demonstrably wrong claim that "no-one cares about freedom of speech" is a question for another day. As is the question of how a cause traditionally fought for by the left has come to be portrayed by people like Labor's shadow attorney-general, Mark Drefyus QC, as an "obsession" with a "niche" issue by the "far right". It would be interesting to know the views of the shadow attorney-general on book burning.

If Malcolm Turnbull spends the next two years talking about values and acting on those values, not only will he be doing good things, he'll give himself a chance of winning the next election. If instead he devotes his time trying to compete against Labor's big spending promises he'll almost



certainly lose.

Hopefully this is the week Malcolm Turnbull discovered what a difference being different makes.

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