

Australia will be the poorer if Abbott is defeated

GREG SHERIDAN



Tony Abbott launches a campaign office in the seat of Warringah. Picture Jonathan Ng

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It is important for Australia, for the health of our political culture, that Tony Abbott wins re-election as the member for Warringah. If he loses it will be an ugly triumph for the worst, most vituperative, spiteful and intolerant tendency to character assassination, which is presently disfiguring Australian public debate.

The matter is entirely up to the electors of Warringah. Abbott has been a very good local member, securing funding for the Big Bear Cottage, a hospice for children, as well as the Royal Far West children's health scheme and countless local good works from upgrades to Brookvale Oval to Manly Surf Life Savers. Perhaps his greatest local contribution, of which any conservationist would be deeply proud, is the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, which ensures that the magnificent defence land of the headlands is preserved as natural parkland and heritage buildings.

He has also thrown himself into good works in his electorate, with decades in the volunteer fire brigade and surf lifesavers' club, and raising money for women's shelters. Like his annual stint volunteering as a teacher's aide in a remote Aboriginal community, there is nothing flashy or showy in all this. It is authentic and springs from a sentiment of human solidarity.

Given Abbott's national profile, this side of his political life is overlooked. But because he is moderately conservative and was successful in the 2013 election — which he won in a landslide — he has been subject to a grotesque hate campaign.

No one who knows Abbott can reconcile the hateful and ludicrous image with reality. Recently on the ABC's *The Drum*, a panellist from *GetUp* said of Abbott: "His existence altogether is l'll say offensive." This is, on any measure, a personalised, insulting and degrading attack designed to demonise a political opponent.

I don't draw attention to it to excite another round in the culture war but just to highlight the astonishing double standard of the rhetorical violence with which everyone on the Left treats Abbott. Just imagine the outrage, the core meltdown, that would greet, say, someone from the Australian Christian Lobby saying of Bill Shorten or Tanya Plibersek that they found their existence offensive.

Much worse was the ABC's Andrew Probyn, describing Abbott in a news segment — yes, a news segment — as "the most destructive politician of his generation". This is deeply dishonest, unprofessional and a disgrace to the ABC. But still it has an effect. Even if many viewers recognise its unreasonableness, others will think, well, this is a news report, it must be basically true.

Think, though, how utterly unfair and unreasonable it is. It has the air of a soft version of Soviet propaganda. There is the ABC, taking the money of all taxpayers but warmly engaging in a campaign of denigration against one mainstream politician because he disagrees with its pieties. Nothing is uglier in modern Australia than the way we periodically designate a public villain and everyone is invited to join in the kicking.

Abbott is accused of having trafficked too much in slogans. But his two most powerful slogans had clear meaning, great effect and won wide support. One was that he would "stop the boats". In the 2013 election Kevin Rudd said this couldn't be done and if Abbott tried to do it he would cause military hostilities with Indonesia. By the way, this is surely the most irresponsible security statement by any recent PM. But it didn't excite any outrage anywhere on the ABC because it conformed with the ABC's doctrinal pieties.

Yet, against expectations, Abbott did stop the boats. This prevented countless drownings at sea. It stopped the unregulated flow of tens of thousands of self-selecting people arriving in northern Australia. As a result, Australia controls its borders. And we run, on a per capita basis, one of the most generous refugee programs in the world. We also have, on a per capita basis, one of the biggest immigration programs. John Howard has said he didn't think anyone but Abbott could have stopped the boats. It required great courage and resolve.

Now, you may not like this policy, but just because it is a policy the ABC doesn't like does not mean it is "destructive". And of course Labor has adopted the very same policy.

Similarly, Abbott labelled Labor's carbon tax "a great big new tax on everything". This was accurate and effective. He won a landslide victory partly as a result. Labor abandoned the carbon tax policy. The ABC has no right to decide that a politician who campaigns for a policy it disagrees with and then wins support is uniquely destructive.

Nor does it have the right to routinely indulge in insult and propaganda against Abbott just because it doesn't agree with his politics.

Malcolm Turnbull's biggest strategic mistake in government was not to bring Abbott back into the cabinet. It would have united the Liberal Party and brought one of the most effective Coalition politicians into the frontline of the political contest.

But Turnbull's decision also had a consequence for Abbott. It meant that there was no serious project in which Abbott could engage the talents, and the standing of a former prime minister, in an obvious nation-building context.

This made it easier for those who would demonise Abbott.

This is not a remotely anti-Labor column. In the areas I'm most concerned with, foreign affairs and national security, Bill Shorten and his team are reasonable and credible. They are meant to oppose Coalition politicians.

But I believe it would be profoundly damaging to our political culture if the activist Left, with the support of the ABC and some of the old Fairfax papers, can demonise one conservative after another and run them out of public life.

Every serious charge against Abbott disappears with scrutiny. The activist Left tries to demonise him for abstaining on the parliamentary vote after same-sex marriage was passed in the plebiscite. But Abbott's conduct here was exemplary. He brought the plebiscite about and he was honest and open about his views during the campaign, unlike his conservative cabinet colleagues who were too scared to give public expression to their views. He also promised to respect the plebiscite result and do nothing to frustrate it. Abstaining was perfectly honourable.

One of the greatest thinkers in our political tradition, Edmund Burke, famously told the electors of Bristol that he owed them his best judgment rather than his slavish obedience.

Abbott is a fine parliamentarian in the Burkean tradition. He is an utterly decent human being. We will be much the poorer if we lose him from parliament.

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<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/australia-will-be-the-poorer-if-abbott-is-defeated/news-story/dbbcb8c068207e0eb29d6d0530fad1f5>