

HD Tony Abbott has a Downton moment

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'Abbott's against popular opinion on this issue.'

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If John Howard, Australia's great conservative elder, thinks you're being a tad old fashioned, it is a sure sign you are pulling some truly medieval moves. When Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced on Tuesday he would reintroduce knights and dames to the Order of Australia honours system, as an "important grace note in our national life", he was mocked in predictable quarters. His critics suggested the Prime Minister had binge-watched too many episodes of Downton Abbey, a happy historical fantasy where lords and ladies stroll across silently tended lawns and noblesse oblige defines the moral order. But the implicit rejection of the innovation by Abbott's political father, the man who trounced the republican movement and defined a generation of Australian conservatism, a man who might conceivably be anointed as a knight himself, was a surprise. The former prime minister told The Australian Financial Review his views on knights and dames remained unchanged - that is, that he believed any move to restore them would be "somewhat anachronistic". Howard's famous political nous remains sharp, it seems, but how much of it has Abbott absorbed? While some saw the surprise announcement as a bizarre distraction that sent a bad message about the priorities of the government, others interpreted it as intentional political messaging. Having resoundingly won the last election, the conservatives are in charge - the nation is theirs to form. The knights and dames announcement "upsets all the right people", as one minister put it. During the Tuesday press conference when he announced the new honours to a stunned press gallery, Abbott looked as though he was having a thoroughly good time, as he did the next day in question time when he referred to Bill Shorten as "the honourable leader of Her Majesty's opposition". As a staunch monarchist and Anglophile, it was one fight the Prime Minister was very happy to pick. The fact that the announcement came the day before Abbott's 20th anniversary as a parliamentarian was a happy coincidence. Despite the pre-budget work of the Economic Review Committee going on behind the scenes, and important announcements like the confirmed **sale** of Medibank Private, the knights-and-dames surprise dominated the political week, together with Attorney-General George Brandis' controversial statement that "people ... have a right to be bigots", made in defence of his reforms to section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, for which an exposure draft was also released this week. Bubbling away in the political background was the backdown of Finance Minister Mathias Cormann over reforms to the regulation of the financial advice sector (reforms he took carriage of after Senator Arthur Sinodinos stepped aside as assistant treasurer due to his involvement in an ICAC hearing); the introduction of the government's "red tape bonfire" legislation; and the government's promise to siphon **billions** of dollars from the **sale** of Medibank Private into roads and other infrastructure, while rebuffing calls to pour the money into healthcare. All of these moves tell us something about the kind of government Abbott wants to **lead** - one which doesn't "police" what its citizens say or think, one which allows business to build infrastructure and one which seeks to "get out of the way" of the relationship between business and its clientele. It felt like the week the Abbott government lifted the veil on its vision for Australia. For the 45 per cent of Australians whose primary vote was for the Coalition at the last election, this is a welcome picture. For others, such as the Abbott haters who participated in the March in March protests of a fortnight ago, it was the week the government turned into everything they always feared it was. But what did it represent to those in between? Those who voted for Abbott but have reservations about his political style? Those who voted against the dysfunctionality of the previous Labor government rather than in favour of the alternative Abbott offered? Those who wanted grown-up government but didn't sign on for ideological

frolics like the reintroduction of knighthoods? Or the ethnic voters in marginal western Sydney seats who are conservative by inclination but wonder about a government that rolls back anti-hate-speech provisions? It is the middle dwellers who decide elections, and while there is no federal poll for the government to fret about, the Liberals are vulnerable

in the Western Australian senate byelection, where they are by no means guaranteed to keep the three seats they won in the now-voided 2013 election result. Also, the fact that Labor managed to cling to power in South Australia has spooked many Victorian Liberals, who face a state election next year, and the prospect that Denis Napthine's government might end up being a one-term one. "What the Abbott government would like to do is get down to matters of policy," says Dr Nick Economou, senior lecturer in politics at Monash University. "But it cannot get any policies of substance - the [abolition of] the carbon tax and the **mining** tax, its deregulation policy - through the Senate until after July 1. There is a vacuum, so they can't do anything substantial yet. Into the vacuum have come all these trivial issues." The Coalition MPs and ministers contacted by Fairfax for this piece were unfazed by the Prime Minister's honours announcement, saying it was only the twitterati getting in a tizz over it, and pointing out that the New Zealand government also reintroduced knighthoods (although, in an interview with News Ltd last year Abbott ruled out following the New Zealand example). Communications Minister and republican Malcolm Turnbull lightly mocked the announcement, and Liberal Senator Sue Boyce, also a republican, said it was disappointing Abbott hadn't taken the decision to cabinet. In an interview with journalist Michelle Grattan, Abbott said the matter was between him and the Queen. Abbott's turnaround, and the timing of the announcement - late on Tuesday afternoon, not long before the all-important nightly news went to air - has raised eyebrows, as has the fact that he bypassed cabinet. It may have been long planned, but

it looked like the sort of cobbled-together announcement the previous Gillard/Rudd government used to churn out to feed the daily news cycle. The kind of thing Abbott, who promised calm, methodical government with "no surprises", was supposed to stand against. As one Liberal elder put it: "This is classic Tony. He has had this idea in his mind for ages. He was always going to do it, so he just went and did it." The reaction against the announcement was particularly strong on social media - a form of voter engagement often disdained by the conservative side of politics, but one which can provide a fast insight into the zeitgeist. Unlike other anti-Abbott complaints over asylum seeker policy or possible changes to Medicare, this time the government was being ridiculed, a theme which was picked up in question time by the opposition, who were so loose in their merriment they were chastised by Speaker Brownyn Bishop for laughing too much. "Humour can be so devastating," says Economou. "When people get angry and splutter, like in the asylum seekers debate, Australian people are not interested. But if you can hold people up to ridicule ... suddenly now his critics have got something to lampoon him with." While Abbott's government has a firm majority of seats, Labor strategists believe support for the Prime Minister himself is shallow, with his disapproval rating hovering

around 50 per cent. These strategists within the opposition's party machine say that voter perception of Abbott as a person is hugely negative, with people distrusting his agenda. "People have underestimated what a terrible drag Julia Gillard was on the Labor vote. The conservatives are realising it's not going to be as easy as it was during the three years of opposition," Economou says. John Warhurst, a professor of political science at the Australian National University, believes the knighthoods announcement "does reveal an appetite for cultural wars within the government". "They are taking a punt though, on community attitudes towards it. That remains to be seen," Warhurst says. "All of this is part of a freedom conservatives are feeling. They can get away with this stuff. Whether or not the public is behind them, they feel emboldened by political success." But there are signs some government MPs are nervous over this muscular display of conservatism, particularly when it comes to the debate over changes to section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act. Under the proposed reforms, released by Attorney-General George Brandis this week, it would no longer be unlawful to offend, insult or humiliate someone on the basis of their race. It would be unlawful to vilify or to intimidate on the basis of race, but not if you are doing so in the course of public debate - an exemption critics say is far too wide. According to a cabinet leak

published by this newspaper on Thursday, Senator Brandis was forced to soften his original proposal, resulting in the exposure draft being released, as opposed to the legislation in its final state. This wriggle room means the government's position can remain "fluid". Ethnic groups have united in their opposition to the changes and the Prime Minister's indigenous advisor, Warren Mundine, was this week vocal in his criticism. Abbott was unable to name a single ethnic group that supported the changes, and Mundine pointed out that the optics of the issue were very bad. "I just find it funny that ... on one side you've got all the Jewish community, you've got the Aboriginal community, you've got the **Chinese** community, you've got Muslims ... and then on the other side you've got [Freedom Commissioner] Tim Wilson ... you've got the Attorney-General ... and you've got Abbott," he said. "To me, that's a clear visual thing about this whole debate." Abbott, it seems, is lined up against popular opinion on this issue. A recent survey of 2100 people by the University of Western Sydney found three-quarters agreed with protections against humiliation, insult and intimidation on the basis of race, culture or religion. Closer to home for Abbott, Liberal backbenchers, particularly those in marginal western Sydney seats with large ethnic populations,

are reportedly nervous from the backlash in their electorates. The week may have provided an insight into Abbott's Australia, but it was merely a curtain-raiser before the main act: the May budget. A government's first budget is its most powerful statement on the kind of administration it wants to be, and the kind of Australia it envisages. As one minister put it this week: "It is the main game. It is what will set the course."

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