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## **Shirtfronted: The story of the Abbott government**

### ***Повалений на землю: історія уряду Еббота***

*Будучи прем'єр-міністром Австралії Тоні Еббот приділяв все більше уваги національній безпеці. Еббот вивів Австралію на передній край в трьох великих геополітичних битвах. На Далекому Сході Еббот пообіцяв, що Австралія твердо підтримає Японію в суперечці з Пекіном за Східно-Китайське море. Еббот також твердо підтримав Україну в протистоянні з путінською Росією. Власне, на цьому фронті він двічі переоцінив свої сили і двічі не виправдав надій. Виливаючи почуття безсилля і обурення у зв'язку з причетністю Росії до знищення борта МН17 і 298 мирних громадян, Еббот пообіцяв повалити на землю Володимира Путіна. Цей невдалий вираз відвернув увагу від серйозності правопорушень Росії. А росіянам ця фраза дозволила несерйозно поставитися до праведного гніву австралійців. Еббот хотів, щоб Австралія направила 1 тис. військових. Міністерство оборони Австралії, а також спецслужби і розвідка виступили категорично проти напрямку військ. У них були три заперечення: 1) неможливість відправити війська в Україну негайно; 2) необхідність просити у України дозвіл; 3) реальний і значний ризик того, що австралійські війська вв'яжуться у війну з повстанцями, яких підтримує Росія.*

<http://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2015/Shirtfronted/PartFourSecurity.html>

Sense of mission: Abbott took to national security with table-thumping zeal, much to the chagrin of agency heads and ministers.

Malcolm Turnbull was nothing if not forthright in telling Tony Abbott his shortcomings. On one occasion, Turnbull found himself in an Adelaide pub drinking beer with a group of workers from the Australian Submarine Corporation.

Abbott, the workers told him, was an idiot.

Of course he isn't, Turnbull replied. The man is a Rhodes Scholar with a degree in economics from Oxford University. He's actually very bright.

The argument went back and forth for a bit till one of the ASC crew delivered the line that ended the argument: "If he's not stupid, why does he keep doing stupid things?"

Other ministers might have kept such an exchange discreetly to themselves. But Turnbull took it straight to the prime minister.

The communications minister related the anecdote. He told his leader that it was important to explain things to the people, not be limited to slogans.

Yeah, yeah mate, was Abbott's response. If he was annoyed, he didn't show it. He certainly didn't heed the advice. Turnbull was to return to his point when he stood before the TV cameras in a parliamentary courtyard a year later to declare his challenge: "We need advocacy, not slogans. We need to respect the intelligence of the Australian people."

In general, Abbott and his chief of staff, Peta Credlin, left Turnbull alone to conduct his portfolio. There were, however, some differences of opinion.

For instance, Abbott wanted to crack down on copyright piracy by individuals, so-called "bedroom downloaders".

At the moment if a movie studio wants to take action against someone downloading a pirated movie to watch at home, it can take her to a civil court and ask a judge to award damages.

But Abbott, at the urging of the movie industry, wanted to make it an offence punishable by a fine. He likened it to a parking ticket, with a fine of perhaps \$20 or \$30 for repeat offenders. It would make it faster and easier for the movie and music industries to act against ordinary people.

The proposal went to the communications minister. Turnbull thought it would be politically explosive. He resisted and the idea quietly died.

Turnbull wanted to give the prime minister the benefit of his advice much more frequently.

He repeatedly asked Abbott to appoint him to the cabinet's national security committee. He asked on about four or five occasions over the two years of the Abbott government, and Abbott refused every time.

The communications minister thought that his expertise would be important in an era when cyber warfare and cyber security were fast-rising priorities. As time went by, Turnbull also became increasingly keen to temper Abbott's urges on national security.

This was one of the reasons Abbott refused. "All his natural instincts are contrary to mine on national security. What's the point of appointing someone who's going to gum up the works?"

It's telling that Abbott cited the centrality of instincts. His attention increasingly turned to national security as his government wore on, for three reasons.

Partly because of events. Partly because the government often went quiet on the economy – with its economic narrative lacking an effective narrator or an audience, security became its default topic. And partly it was Abbott's instincts.

His extravagant taste in national flags as prime ministerial decor was commonly mocked, but a senior public servant who worked closely with him observes: "It's wrong to see Abbott's attachment to national security as a matter of political convenience. He has deep belief. He deeply believes that it's fallen to the English-speaking world to fight evil wherever it is found."

He pushed Australia to the forefront in three big, separate geopolitical struggles; in the East, the Middle East and the West.

"The front is everywhere," quipped Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

In the East, he pledged firm Australian support for Japan in its contest with Beijing over the East China Sea. In the Middle East, he made Australia second only to the United States in the scale of its armed contribution to fighting Daesh.

And in the West, he stood firmly with Ukraine against Putin's Russia. Indeed, this was the front where he overreached and was twice brought up short.

Job security: Tony Abbott's attention increasingly turned to national security as his government wore on.

In his frustration and anger at Russia's complicity in the destruction of MH17 and 298 civilians, he promised to "shirtfront" Vladimir Putin.

It was an unfortunate distraction from the seriousness of Russia's misdeeds.

It gave Bill Shorten an opening to mock Abbott for his "brain snap" and the Russians to make light of the Australians' rightful anger.

Ten months later, Russia was still ridiculing Abbott in international meetings, wanting to know when he was going to get around to carrying out his threat.

Russia's Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at a meeting with counterparts from nine other countries on August 6 in Kuala Lumpur, put it to Julie Bishop in his gravelly, heavily accented voice: "Is your prime minister still going to shirtfront my president?"

The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, jumped in. "Yeah," he said, "we've been putting money on the result, and we're backing Putin."

Bishop shut down the levity with a curt, "thank you for that, John" and returned the discussion to the agenda for the meeting, the ASEAN Regional Forum ministerial meeting.

When the disaster occurred, Abbott convened cabinet's national security committee, which was to meet an extraordinary 18 times over the next three weeks as Abbott conducted Australia's response to the shooting down.

"He was magnificent," said a senior minister on the committee. "There was some reluctance by some of the agencies to really fully commit and Abbott, almost physically, had to move them to do what needed to be done." In the end, the recovery operation, a risky one in a combat zone, went smoothly.

But most of the officials involved thought Abbott guilty, at least in the initial few days, of recklessness in his early effort to mobilise a force of 1000 armed troops to the crash site.

In the earliest days, when it seemed the Russian-backed rebels who had control of the site were not going to allow the Dutch and Australian governments to retrieve their dead, Abbott and his Dutch counterpart discussed the idea of sending an armed force to Ukraine. The troops would confront any interference.

Abbott wanted Australia to contribute a force of 1000, as a matter of urgency. Without the force, there was no guarantee that the site could be secured, remains of the dead recovered and a proper crash investigation carried out.

The idea was adamantly opposed by all the defence and security and intelligence agencies involved, and their cabinet ministers.

There were three main objections. First was simple logistics. Defence said that it would take a couple of weeks to get 1000 properly equipped and supported troops to Ukraine, too slow to usefully secure the site against interference.

Second was that Ukraine would have to grant permission to allow a foreign army on its soil, another source of unpredictable delay.

Third was the biggest. The risk that Australia's troops could become entangled in a war with the Russian-backed rebel force was real, and was too great.

The mission was to retrieve bodies, not save lives. "It was overwhelmingly a national tragedy, not a national security crisis," one official pointed out. "Abbott was treating it as a national security crisis."

Did Australia really want to find itself entangled in a hot war with Russia by accident in defence of no one?

Abbott insisted the troops be deployed. The heads of the agencies and ministers spent two days talking him out of it. Opposing Abbott were the chief of the defence force, the secretary of the Defence Department, the overseas spy agency ASIS, the Australian Federal Police, the domestic spy agency ASIO, the Department of Foreign Affairs, as well as all the cabinet ministers with responsibility for these agencies – Defence Minister David Johnston, Attorney-General George Brandis and Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop.

Even the secretary of Abbott's own department, Ian Watt of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, was opposed.

Rounding out the solid wall of opposition to Abbott was the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party, Warren Truss.

The prime minister was isolated but undaunted. "He was quite narky to the chief of the defence force [Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin], implying he was being less than helpful," said a participant.

Abbott's determination softened, however, after a phone hook-up.

Abbott had appointed Angus Houston as special envoy to Ukraine to lead the recovery effort. In the hook-up from Ukraine, the former chief of the defence force told the NSC that he preferred unarmed police officers to armed troops. An armed force would create more problems than solutions, he said.

In the event, once the UN Security Council had authorised the recovery of bodies and wreckage, Russia ordered its client rebels to back off.

Unarmed Dutch and Australian police officers were able to conduct the work. The military deployment became academic.

Abbott took Binskin and the Federal Police commissioner to dinner, interpreted as a smoking of the peace pipe. "It'd be wrong to portray Abbott as mad or angry," said a member of the NSC. "He was frustrated."

Nonetheless, some Australian armed force was covertly deployed even after the rebels had started to co-operate. Abbott decided that Australian special forces should be on hand in case the rebels should decide to make trouble during the recovery.

He wanted the highly capable troops quietly positioned in Ukraine and in Amsterdam as a precaution. On this he did get his way. They did not need to be called upon.

The National Security Committee was not Abbott's plaything, but it was a sanctuary for him from Malcolm Turnbull. Unlike some more deferential ministers, the communications minister didn't hesitate to stand up to the prime minister when he thought he was in error.

Most notorious was the cabinet revolt against Abbott in May over his plan to strip citizenship from Australians who had no other.

But even more inflammatory than the proposal was the manner of it. Abbott tried to ambush his cabinet with the idea. Six ministers opposed the plan, but Turnbull was the most strident and broadened the attack to include Abbott's management of the government: "Here we go again," he told Abbott in the cabinet meeting. "This is a shambles."

But Turnbull attacked Abbott in the cabinet on a number of other occasions, too.

In the first meeting after the February spill, for instance, Turnbull delivered a broadside against his leader in a wide-ranging critique of his performance.

So angry, Abbott loyalists later remarked, that his frustration was showing. He was obviously disappointed that Abbott was still prime minister, they warned their leader.

Despite the tensions and the raw nerves in the government at the time, or perhaps because of them, word of this confrontation did not leak to the media.

Turnbull's frustration continued to build. It would soon emerge unstoppably.