

Is this the end of the line for nationalism in Australia?

If this political moment lasts, the country's conservative movement could be transformed



WALEED ALY

Just two months ago, Australia seemed destined for what the country's commentariat calls a "Tampa" election. That's local shorthand for a campaign characterised by race baiting and scare tactics about refugees — a term derived from the 2001 election a few months after the government of Prime Minister John Howard ordered special forces to board a Norwegian freight ship called the MV Tampa, carrying more than 400 rescued refugees, to prevent it from reaching Australia.

A new law that allows refugees on Nauru and Manus Island to come to Australia for necessary medical treatment promised to put refugees front and centre in the upcoming general election, scheduled for May 18.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his coalition government saw this legislation passed against their will. They had railed against it, warning that the law would allow "rapists" and "pedophiles" into Australia. An opinion poll around that time showed a significant bounce for the government.

How long ago that seems. In the wake of the Christchurch, New Zealand, terrorist attack on Muslims last month, the Morrison government now finds itself under pressure over issues that recently appeared to give it an advantage.

For the moment, this takes the form of relentless questioning about where the government plans to place the far-right, nationalist One Nation party on its "how to vote" cards in the election. Those cards,

which are a consequence of Australia's preferential voting system in which voters list all candidates on the ballot in order of preference, are often a matter of political gaming, designed to maximise a party's likelihood of success. Normally, they're of interest only to political buffs.

But every now and again, they come to be read as a declaration of ideological affinity and become a mainstream issue. This is the case following the horror in New Zealand, given One Nation's history of racist politics, recently expressed in its leader's declaration that "Islam is a disease; we need to vaccinate ourselves against that."

Will the government pledge to put One Nation last on its voting card?

The question has dogged the government — becoming a staple of news conferences and interviews with parliamentarians — because the government hasn't provided a straightforward answer. After some hemming and hawing, there is still disagreement within the government about what to do.

The whole question has arisen for the governing coalition because it flirts with these kinds of politics.

Indeed, such was the hostility of numerous parliamentarians' rhetoric toward Islam that the head of Australia's top intelligence organisation advised them to moderate their language.

Perhaps the government's most committed member on this score is the Home Affairs minister, Peter Dutton, who recently asserted that people in Melbourne were "scared" to go to restaurants at night because of an epidemic of African gang violence — a supposed epidemic that even the state of Victoria, where Melbourne is located, says is overblown "hysteria."

By contrast, Dutton has argued that Australia should give "special



Protesters rallying against Islam

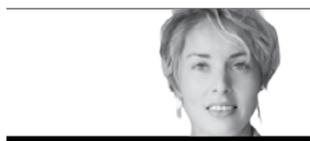
attention" to white South farmers, whom he regards as particularly persecuted. He would "abide by our laws, j into our society, work hard, a life on welfare." He is not a politician expressing these views.

In October, senators voted in favour of a One Nation motion incorporating the white supremacist slogan "It's OK to be white government later blamed a ministerial error for the vote, having initially trumpeted it as evidence of its oppositionism of any kind."

The kindest interpretation of this is that the coalition is sloppy and inattentive to t

Maybe we'll be better off with a clown

Ukraine's absurd election may turn out well for its



ALISA SOPOVA

"No Promises, No Excuses!" Such is the only political message of the comedian who could soon lead one of Europe's largest countries. That outcome may seem absurd. Yet it could be an opportunity.

Volodymyr Zelensky scored a spectacular victory in the first round of Ukraine's presidential election on March 31, winning some 30 per cent of the votes, compared with about 16pc for the incumbent, Petro O Poroshenko.

It was an astonishing result not only because the actor's only political experience to date consists of playing the part of a president on TV, but also because he presented no platform, no policy proposal.

Branding himself "Ze," he campaigned mostly via social media postings and by touring the country with his comedy shows. Instead of substantive messages, he offered banter and mockery. When he was accused of being a clown instead of a serious can-

didate, Zelensky proudly agreed, posting a video selfie on Instagram with a round red nose superimposed on his face.

His defiance has proved triumphant, and it may well make him president after the runoff vote on April 21. Better to keep silent than to say anything in today's Ukraine — the country with the least trust in its government, according to a recent Gallup survey.

Since the Orange Revolution in 2004, politicians of all stripes have promised to defeat corruption and pull Ukraine out of the mire of its transition from communism. After so many lies, failures and disappointments, such promises have turned into cruel clichés.

The government's continuing war against the Russia-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine has also created a toxic public discourse. Journalists have been called traitors simply for seeking accreditation from the separatist authorities of the Donbass region. Using the word "conflict" instead of "war" or "Russia" instead of "aggressor state" can destroy a reputation. Say something, almost anything, and you expose yourself to being called too pro-Russian, too pro-Western, too nationalistic or not patriotic enough.

In this climate, Zelensky's blank slate is an asset for him — as well as a canvas onto which people can paint whatever they want. And what do the people want right now? Apparently to punish Poroshenko for forgetting his own slogan to "live in a new way" from the 2014 election, and for returning instead to the comfort of the old, familiar Ukraine of corruption, poverty, inequality and dirty politics. Back then, a popular revolt had just toppled President Viktor F Yanukovich, who fled the country in disgrace. The rejection of Poroshenko today is less thrilling but no less momentous.

Just a few weeks ago, before the first round of voting, he was presenting himself as the only possible head of state, the nation's saviour. His political message had become markedly conservative. "Army. Language. Faith." Those three ingredients, the president repeatedly emphasised, were the keys to the "unique national identity" of Ukraine — even though the country is bilingual and secular.

At a rally in Cherkasy, central Ukraine, earlier this year, a local activist asked the president if he was going to fight corruption. Poroshenko answered, "I have a request for you: Light a candle — because you are a nonbeliever —

and God will calm you." He called the man, who had spoken in Russian, a "Moscow provocateur." A video of the exchange went viral. Poroshenko's arrogance was then punished in the voting booths.

After that he began to lose his nerve. In the opening move of the campaigning for the April 21 runoff, Poroshenko's team posted billboards that portrayed him facing off with President Vladimir V Putin of Russia. The move was widely ridiculed: Poroshenko, having nothing left to offer, appeared to be grasping at nationalist straws and trying to instill fear in a boogeyman. His staff promptly took down the ads.

In a poll taken April 9-14, 17pc of respondents said they intended to vote for Poroshenko and more than 48pc for Zelensky. And while Poroshenko has misstepped since the first round of voting, Zelensky, true to form, has done little except mock his competitor. After challenging the incumbent to a debate, Zelensky stood him up on April 14. (The two men disagreed about when to hold the event.) Another debate is scheduled for April 19.

Zelensky's supporters are often accused of confusing the TV comedy series in which he plays the president, "Servant of the People," with real life. The charge is para-



Zelensky's blank slate is an asset for him.

doxical because the show is ruthless towards everyday Ukrainians: If people vote for Zelensky hoping this fiction will become reality, they are endorsing a very poor portrayal of a