

THE AUSTRALIAN

'Primal scream' in the US is here just a whimper



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in Canberra on Thursday. Picture: AAP

SARAH MARTIN, ROSIE LEWIS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM November 12, 2016

A “primal scream” from Middle America that saw Donald Trump elected president is rooted in flatlining wage growth, Malcolm Turnbull says, as he draws lessons from the US election for the Australian context.

The Prime Minister argued that Australia’s strong economic growth had resulted in less inequality than in the US, saying although there was “disillusionment” with the political class, it was not as severe as in America.

However, Mr Turnbull’s assessment of the shock election result came as former prime minister Tony Abbott warned that Australian voters were feeling the same sense of disillusionment as seen in the US, and mainstream political parties ignored the growing disconnect “at their peril”.

Mr Turnbull said there was “very real” disenchantment, but said prioritising economic growth was the best way to assure voters that the government was looking after their interests.

“One of the big differences between Australia and the United States ... is that we have strong economic growth, we’ve had consistent growth in real incomes,” Mr Turnbull said on Melbourne radio 3AW.

“What you’ve seen in the United States over a long period of time is flatlining in real terms — not just nominal terms — flatlining of middle incomes. That is one of the primary sources of that primal scream (in America).”

However, he acknowledged that there were parts of Australia where there had been a “a very significant decrease in employment”, and said, as Prime Minister, he needed to “connect with the electorate”.

Speaking about the backlash against the establishment that had been a feature of the US voting, Mr Abbott said middle-class people were sick of having their values and opinions “sneered at” by elites. He pointed to the rise of minor parties as evidence of voter disenchantment.

“We have a problem. More and more people are feeling less and less represented by mainstream political parties,” he said.

Mr Turnbull said there had not been a “huge increase” in the vote for minor parties in the most recent election compared to 2013.

However, the drift to minor parties was a very real phenomenon that the government needed to address, he said.