

Dangerous murmurs coming from anti-Turnbull camp

The Australian, November 25, 2015, Dennis Shanahan

After 10 weeks of Liberal euphoria, a remarkably successful transition to Prime Minister for Malcolm Turnbull and limited vendettas, a simmering resentment among ousted conservatives and signs of retribution against Tony Abbott's supporters are creating a dangerous political atmosphere.

They are only early signs of growing suspicion and animosity but for the Prime Minister to ignore them would endanger the flying start he has achieved since he seized the leadership on September 14. Since Turnbull's return from overseas, there has been an accumulation of events that hint at a darker world beneath the relative harmony within the Coalition government.

Yesterday Turnbull was seen to be giving his predecessor a "slap down" in his national security address to parliament suggesting there was no room for "gestures or machismo" and ridiculed any idea of a "unilateral" Australian invasion of Syria or a "Western-led invasion".

Public declarations of the need for tough action in Syria from Abbott and his former defence minister, Kevin Andrews, as well as exhortations from other supporters to restore Peter Dutton, as Immigration Minister, to the national security committee of cabinet, demonstrated conservative fears that the Turnbull government would weaken on national security.

Retorts from Julie Bishop, Defence Minister Marise Payne and now Turnbull rejecting "unilateral" action were barbed but misleading in that Abbott had not suggested unilateral action or a mass invasion.

Even as Turnbull said the response to the Paris terror attacks "must be as clear eyed and strategic", it was "not a time for gestures or machismo" and there was no support "for a large US-led Western army to attempt to conquer ISIL" in Iraq or Syria, the outrage grew that he was putting up a "straw man" argument against Abbott. While supporters of Turnbull and the Foreign Minister see the public calls for tough action on Syria from Abbott as "sniping", conservatives argue it is not the leaking and white-anting that undermined Abbott but public policy debate. There is also no parallel between the debilitating cabinet leaks and damaging stories that emerged about Julia Gillard when she replaced Kevin Rudd in 2010 and disrupted Labor's election campaign. But there is a danger that provocation from either side will lead to a decline in trust and co-operation that will feed existing resentments and animosities on both sides.

"It's as if no one is allowed an opinion," one Abbott loyalist said.

The other side counters there was too much "command and control" of ideas and personnel during the Abbott leadership.

Liberal MPs are dangerously starting to form sides again with damaging leaks and claims about Abbott wanting to "come back" and conspiring at lunches countered with suggestions that Turnbull's supporters are overreacting and want to see Abbott "not just politically dead but buried and cremated" to paraphrase Abbott's own words.

Apart from feeding the suspicion and sense of vendetta Turnbull's put-down to Abbott diverted from his main security message, that fighting terror was the priority, that Islamic State had to be defeated in Syria and that Australia, with no imminent plans for sending troops, would consider allies' requests.

Soon after the parliamentary address the process began to replace Abbott's hand-picked head of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Michael Thawley, with the man he shuffled out, Martin Parkinson, amid public service speculation that Abbott's chosen Treasury head, John Fraser, could go as well. Although there is general relief among senior public servants about the change of attitude from the Prime Minister's office since Abbott's removal there is still a view that too many changes will bring uncertainty. The permanent appointment of Turnbull's former departmental head, Drew Clarke, as his chief of staff

and the departure next year of esteemed foreign affairs secretary Peter Varghese are not deemed to be part of any anti-Abbott shuffle.

But as Newspan shows the Coalition leading Labor 53 to 47 per cent on a two-party preferred basis, and with Turnbull leading Bill Shorten 64 to 15 per cent as preferred prime minister, the last thing the Coalition needs is suspicion breeding animosity and divided camps.