

## **Malcolm Turnbull's not the messiah, he's just a haughty boy**

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Collective nouns are always fun. We have mobs of kangaroos, unkindnesses of ravens and irrelevancies of vice-chancellors. For prime ministers, we have settled on disappointments.

The pattern is clear. We welcome new leaders with profound interest and high hopes. We spout grand predictions that would defy Nostradamus. Then, when leaders emerge as merely human, we move to disengage and discard.

Malcolm Turnbull is the current beneficiary of this public fickleness. Welcomed as the Messiah, he is now increasingly dismissed as just a very haughty boy.

We have seen all this before. Kevin Rudd went from *Zeitgeist* to political ghost. Julia Gillard, our first female prime minister, was hailed as history and interred as a footnote. Tony Abbott, the brilliant opposition leader, is remembered as a prime ministerial fail-to-launch.

For Turnbull, the problem is particularly marked. Expectations of him were so high — even among those who would never vote for him — that anything short of a New Jerusalem was bound to constitute failure.

But it is worth thinking why modern prime ministers all seem to disappoint the electorate, and whether the problem is us or them. There are two factors at work.

The first is that the job is just so hard. True, any talented minister can look at their boss and critique. But the reality is that the difference between constant, ultimate responsibility and just being a good political contributor is profound. That is why prime ministers age in dog years.

The second is much more insidious. People become prime minister because they show certain outstanding political talents.

In Turnbull's case, he is the big thinker and the bold talker. Over decades, love him or loathe him, he has been presenting the Australian people with striking visions, from the republic, to climate change, through radically modernised communications, to economic reform.

There is no doubt that Big Picture Malcolm impressed the electorate. Here was someone who not only, like Rudd, had ideas but unlike Rudd had the stamina to implement them.

But then it starts. The constant erosive pressure on a prime minister, by colleagues, advisers, pundits and themselves, not to do anything risky. Just play it safe, and all will be well.

It is a seductive song, with two parts. The first is positive. The people love you, Malcolm. School-children cheer you. You're more popular than God. Just lie back and enjoy it.

The negative is even more compelling. You know you can be erratic, Malcolm. You know your judgment isn't all it could be. You can go over the top, Malcolm. Remember Godwin Grech.

The result is you suddenly have a prime minister who has been talked out of every quality that got them the job in the first place. Malcolm the Great is suddenly Malcolm the Circumspect, sniffing out potential disaster instead of policy opportunity.

It is like a cricketer who has been persuaded by his coach that none of his shots are safe to play. All he can do is huddle in front of the wicket and take his punishment.

It is no coincidence all of our recent PMs have somehow lost their personality while gaining office. Kevin II was a shattered parody of Kevin I. Gillard was always trying to unleash the "real Julia". Abbott PM was a cardboard cut-out of the opposition leader who stormed the Lodge.

Turnbull already has paid a hefty price for shelving his inner Malcolm. After an eight-year cycle of triviality, he had an opportunity to go to the people with a serious narrative about big reform to solve big problems. As election options narrow and time runs out, there no longer is time for that sort of conversation.

He will win the next election, of course. Bill Shorten will trouble, not topple him. But with that win will not come the sweeping mandate for reform so critical to a prime minister like Turnbull.

Nor will he take the Senate, even with voting changes.

A Turnbull who was going to save the country might have been given a double mandate. One who is merely going to govern will have to settle for usual politics of frustration.

The good news is that not all is lost. Even between now and the election, there is time for Turnbull to adopt a serious entree of reform as a sign of things to come. And after the election, he can start preparing the main course.

But there will never be a great prime minister who does not take great risks.

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