

# Malcolm Turnbull will lose if he doesn't win back the Liberal base

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Only a few months ago, there was widespread gloom and despondency on Opposition benches. Many Labor MPs were preparing for political oblivion. Bill Shorten's prospects had been written off and his leadership regarded as no more than a joke. The knives were being sharpened.

There was, of course, much truth in the criticisms. Shorten had the great misfortune of leading Labor after the disastrous Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era. He was not very good at attracting positive press. The polls showed he was the most unpopular opposition leader since the notoriously useless, though honourable, Brendan Nelson. The royal commission into corrupt unions was supposed to sound the death knell for the embattled former head of the AWU.

Bill Shorten has turned the tables on Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. *Photo: Michael Mucci*

Yet such is the magic of politics, here we are seven weeks before the federal election and Shorten could be our sixth prime minister in as many years. The Labor leader gave Turnbull such a good thumping in their first TV debate on Friday night, you almost expected the moderator David Speers from Sky News to step in to end the bout on grounds of compassion. While the PM was dull and dithering, ill at ease with answering questions from ordinary Australians about hip-pocket issues, Shorten was sound in style and substance. An audience of undecided voters gave it to the challenger by 42 to 29. Add to this the latest Newspoll that shows Labor leading the Coalition 51-49 on a two-party-preferred basis and the election is suddenly up for grabs.

Meanwhile, the Dyson royal commission has come and gone, and punters wonder what all the fuss was about. From tax reform to negative gearing to the banking sector, Shorten and his highly impressive shadow treasurer Chris Bowen have exposed a Prime Minister with no coherent direction, exhibiting poor judgment, and swimming increasingly out of his depth.

It takes something close to genius to topple a first-term federal government, something that has not happened since 1931. Yet against all the odds and in defiance of conventional wisdom Shorten could do it. No wonder the Canberra press gallery is coming to believe that he is a more formidable politician than has all too often been portrayed. *With seven weeks left until voters go to the polls, there was little to be gained by "winning" the people's forum. Photo: Andrew Meares*

Nor is it merely Shorten's weakness that has been exaggerated. So has the strength of his opponent. The impression is steadily growing that the PM has lost his way. Against expectations, Turnbull, who at first seemed so capable and confident, is coming to resemble Kevin Rudd in the first half of 2010: adrift, vacillating and at the mercy of events.

No one could deny that he has made a series of mistakes. Who can forget the failure of nerve when he backed off at the very last moment from prosecuting long-overdue tax reform "and shafting his Treasurer in the process? Or the former merchant banker's advice for young Australians struggling to buy their first home: that their parents should just "shell out" money for them? The Labor party's attack ads are practically writing themselves.

It was not meant to be like this. When Turnbull backstabbed Tony Abbott last September, the overwhelming media and political consensus was that the former republican activist was bound for greatness. He was, we were told, the new Whitlam, the great reformer who would transform Australia into a beacon of progressiveness. There was a real sense of excitement. In an echo of Harold Macmillan's famous declaration in 1957 that Brits had "never had it so good," Turnbull declared: "There's never been a more exciting time to be an Australian."

But the trouble for any politician exciting high expectations is that they can almost never be fulfilled. And no Australian politician in recent times has ever excited such expectations as Turnbull. His gifts of individuality, intelligence and image management did a terrific job in winning the Liberal leadership. They are of less use in governing, especially in the relentless digital media cycle when every setback and screw-up is magnified.

You might say that although the race has narrowed there is still no way Turnbull could fall to a former union leader who knifed two sitting prime ministers. A score of seats, after all, is a lot to lose. But nothing is certain in politics: circumstances can change quickly, and without warning.

Winston Churchill defeated fascism in 1945 only to lose that year's election to a socialist in one of the biggest landslides in British history. George H.W. Bush won the Gulf War and brought the Cold War to a peaceful end only to lose to a womanising, draft-dodging, dope-smoking governor from a backwater state. And John Howard presided over nearly 12 years of unprecedented prosperity before losing to a nerd from Nambour who dined on his own ear wax.

What's different about Turnbull is that he has not actually done anything to explain his rapid downhill trajectory. He is no Paul Keating or Campbell Newman, legislating unpopular big-bang reforms in the national interest or spending cuts to rein in budget deficits as far as the eye can see. Contradicting himself almost every week, Turnbull has stood fast in indecision. He has been consistently indecisive.

I carry no brief for Shorten. I've voted Liberal in every federal election since I was eligible in 1990. But I know many life-long Liberal partisans who won't vote for the Coalition on July 2. Most will even put Labor above Liberal on the ballot paper.

Why? Because they feel Turnbull does not represent their ideals and interests: he won't prosecute the case against Labor's ETS, nor will he unashamedly defend tough border protection. His proposal to change superannuation is just the latest example of betrayal. The party of Menzies, Howard and Costello, remember, is the custodian of the centre-right tradition in Australian politics. He has seven weeks to confound his critics.

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