

Federal election 2016: Abbott ready if Turnbull stumbles

Troy Bramston, The Australian, May 24, 2016

The Liberal Party is so demoralised by Malcolm Turnbull's leadership that some in its upper echelons are now contemplating the previously unthinkable in the event of a shock election defeat: a return to Tony Abbott.

The situation inside the Liberal Party is so volatile that if it doesn't win a convincing election victory — and at this stage the contest is too close to definitively call — the party will be engulfed in another bout of soul-destroying turmoil and Turnbull will be blamed.

I've been surprised at the extent of the despair in Liberal ranks. You don't have to go very far to find it. Past and present MPs, party officials and staffers freely offer up criticisms of the Prime Minister and the Liberal campaign strategy unprompted. Many of these views are being aired on television, radio and social media, and in newspapers and magazines.

On the campaign trail, Bill Shorten looks confident and is having fun. His issues are dominating: health costs, school funding, negative gearing, superannuation and penalty rates. His messages are sharp and his policies are understood. Labor's campaign is far from faultless but overall, it is winning the contest so far.



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In contrast, Turnbull appears wooden and awkward when meeting voters. He is not a natural politician. The Coalition's TV advertisements fail to excite and they are losing the increasingly important social media campaign where many voters get their news. The "jobs and growth" slogan is not resonating with voters worried about health, education and cost of living.

Underlying the government's poor campaign performance is how fast Turnbull has squandered his biggest political asset: his popularity. The speed and scale of the decline in Turnbull's approval rating is one of the more astonishing things to happen in Australian politics for a long time.

[The latest Newspann](#) shows Turnbull's satisfaction rating is 38 per cent and his disapproval is 50 per cent. In net terms, his satisfaction has fallen from plus 38 per cent to minus 12 per cent over the past six months. Shorten's net satisfaction rating is also minus 12 per cent. In other words, Shorten is now as popular as Turnbull.

Turnbull still has a lead over Shorten as preferred prime minister by 46 per cent to 31 per cent. But even here, Turnbull is tumbling fast. Just two months ago, Turnbull's lead over Shorten was 55 to 21 per cent. To put this into sharper focus, Turnbull's lead now is 15 percentage points but in March it was 34 percentage points.

The pressing concern for Turnbull is the conservative revolt under way inside his own party. Many Liberal voters did not like the big spending, big taxing budget. They are seething over the retrospective changes to superannuation. They are appalled by suggestions the party would swap preferences with the Greens. And they are still smarting over the leadership coup.

It has even sparked a new movement of disaffected Liberals who say they won't vote for the party at all, or who may register a protest vote in the Senate by temporarily switching their allegiance to the Liberal Democrats led by David Leyonhjelm.

However, the pessimism in Liberal ranks is not matched by optimism in Labor ranks. While never saying never, few if any senior Labor figures believe they will win the election. Yet the probability of a minority parliament that would give them a shot at power is a scenario increasingly being discussed.

But if the Liberals do find themselves in opposition, then the leadership will again be in play. In this scenario, it is highly unlikely that Turnbull will remain leader. His leadership challenge to Abbott will be seized upon as the principal cause of the defeat.

It is doubtful that the next two most senior Liberals, deputy leader Julie Bishop and Treasurer Scott Morrison, will be seen as viable leadership contenders. And it is too soon for the next generation: minister Josh Frydenberg and former West Australian treasurer Christian Porter.

So, with the party reeling from defeat and there being no obvious leadership successor, all eyes will be on the re-elected member for Warringah. For Abbott, the irony is too delicious to contemplate now. But, sitting on the opposition benches, would Abbott spurn the opportunity to return?

First, he is the vanquished former prime minister denied the opportunity to lead his government into an election campaign. He has a moral case to reclaim the leadership that was snatched from him. Second, as a former opposition leader who saw the Gillard government reduced to minority status and then defeated the Rudd government overwhelmingly, Abbott knows how to campaign effectively from opposition.

Third, he has a record that he likes to trumpet and which would be a rallying call for many in the party: stopping asylum-seeker boats, axing the carbon and mining taxes, and finalising free trade agreements.

The big question is: has Abbott learned from his many political mistakes? Many MPs would want to know that Abbott has learned from the past. His third Quadrant essay does contain some introspection.

The Liberal Party has recalled Andrew Peacock, John Howard and Turnbull to the leadership. Labor reinstated Kevin Rudd in 2013 after he had been written off in 2010. Robert Menzies staged a triumphal return to the prime ministership in 1949 after being rejected by his colleagues in 1941. Abbott knows these parallels better than most.

The bottom line is that as Turnbull falters and conservatives revolt, a return to Abbott post-election cannot be ruled out. The actors may have changed but the script remains the same. Abbott, a rejected and dejected man only months ago, waits in the wings to be recalled to the political stage.