

Bad Malcolm must be restrained if PM wishes to succeed



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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Is bad Malcolm back? That's the question many are asking after the first parliamentary sitting week. I don't think we can jump to that conclusion so soon but the signs are not good.

It was a live question from the moment the election results started to roll in on the evening of July 2, when voters had to wait until after midnight for any sort of appearance; when the Prime Minister ditched the speaking notes prepared for him, instead speaking off the cuff. He forgot (or simply didn't bother) to offer condolences to colleagues who had lost their seats fighting for his election, refusing to take any responsibility for the election result. It was a particularly unedifying spectacle because several people who didn't get re-elected were key figures who helped install Turnbull into the leadership.

Rather than acknowledging genuine voter concerns about healthcare that had fed a disingenuous Labor scare campaign about privatising Medicare, the Prime Minister blamed the result on Labor's lies, prompting the conclusion that voters are idiots. They were too dumb, naive or simple-minded to see through Labor's attacks. Not the best message for a political leader to deliver. If John Howard had one principle he abided by more than any other during a long and successful career in politics, it was that the voters always got it right — even when they turfed out his government in 2007, even when he lost his seat.

This week I found myself accused by the PM in question time of making up stories, when this newspaper reported on revelations in my book *The Turnbull Gamble* (written with Wayne Errington). Multiple sources — in cabinet and the powerful expenditure review committee — confirmed that the PM and Treasurer Scott Morrison had posited making reforms to negative gearing. The book includes a blow-by-blow account of discussions in cabinet — who said what and when.

If we were making things up, as the PM suggested (the fiercest attack on an author's professional integrity any politician can make), it's a pretty stupid — not to mention unethical — thing to do.

Doing so in such detail? Fancy deciding not only to fabricate a story but then to give copious details as to what transpired.

But this isn't the first time Turnbull has accused me of such conduct, and other journalists would be able to say the same. The bad Malcolm many worry will return to infect the prime ministership was behind Turnbull's downfall as opposition leader. My first experience involved a story in this paper in 2009 about Turnbull offering Peter Dutton's position on the frontbench to Fran Bailey (who occupied the most marginal seat in the country) to entice her not to quit. She was a former Howard minister who called Turnbull to let him know she would not be recontesting her seat. Dutton had lost preselection for a safe seat he was looking to move into, following an unfavourable redistribution in his own marginal seat. When he became leader, Tony Abbott's improvement in the polls helped save Dutton.

I told Turnbull that Bailey had confirmed the story and that would rate a mention in the article. I was after a response. He said (on the record) it was a lie, but he wasn't suggesting Bailey was fabricating the story. Turnbull accused me of lying that Bailey had confirmed the exchange, which was an incredibly confronting accusation less than six months into my new job at The Australian. Turnbull called Bailey (oh, to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation), who stood by her recollection, and he rang me back with an unsurprisingly different tone. At least I was no longer being called a liar, but Turnbull disputed Bailey's recollection of events all the same.

The same thing happened when I wrote a front-page story detailing an anonymous backbench survey (in which all Liberal backbench senators and members bar one participated, a response rate to die for). It revealed that two-thirds of Turnbull's backbench didn't want him to do a deal on the emissions trading scheme before the Copenhagen climate change summit, as he was in the process of negotiating with Kevin Rudd. Solidarity in numbers emboldened Liberal MPs, confirming it wasn't just outspoken outliers such as Cory Bernardi who didn't want to do the deal.

Turnbull asserted the survey was made up. Julie Bishop took a more empirical approach, ringing around the backbench to get their views. The findings she communicated to Turnbull? Two-thirds of the backbench didn't want the then opposition leader to do a deal on the ETS with Rudd before Copenhagen, as reported at the time. If I had made up the survey, as Turnbull claimed, boy did I get lucky that the results correlated so neatly with Bishop's ring-around.

Returning to the negative gearing revelations in cabinet, I wasn't there — I'm relying on the accounts of others. Suffice it to say I'm confident, as I was when previously accused by Turnbull of making up stories. It's one thing for the PM to dispute the facts, it's another thing to suggest the story is an author fabrication. Only bad Malcolm would level such an accusation. Bad Malcolm had many vices in opposition that led to fiascos such as Utegate and the Godwin Grech shenanigans, a collapse in the polls and the backbench revolt on the ETS.

A key ingredient to the support for a Turnbull return to the leadership six years later among most Liberal MPs was the view that he had learned from his mistakes, like Howard between his stints as Liberal leader (removed in 1989, returned in 1995). Arthur Sinodinos made this point in his ABC interview on the night of the spill. If Turnbull wants to give himself the best chance of having a successful term in office he must calmly go about his business, not let himself be (mis)led by colleagues who don't share his values. He must show leadership on policy scripts that he is passionate about. While the re-emergence of bad Malcolm is something he can't allow to happen, it would be a bigger worry if Turnbull continues to shrink into the job.

Journalists are down on the PM, the public clearly is, given the backlash at the election alongside poor personal polling numbers in this week's Newspoll. Conservative commentators are doing their collective best to attack Turnbull's every move, and more of his own colleagues are starting to question his performance. Added to all this, Labor is up and about. There aren't many of us left who hope Turnbull makes a good fist of it, but I'm one of them. In his purist form he's my kind of philosophical Liberal.

However, blaming others is what bad Malcolm used to do. Let's hope he doesn't fall back into that approach.

Peter van Onselen is a professor at the University of Western Australia. His book *The Turnbull Gamble* (with Wayne Errington) is out this week.