

Omens good for Malcolm Turnbull thanks to fish called 'Dasher'

[David Crowe](#), The Australian, 12:00AM September 9, 2016

Malcolm Turnbull is a man in need of a good omen. This week he got two of them. As he gets to the end of seven days of talks with world leaders, the signs suggest he can walk into federal parliament on Monday with renewed confidence against Bill Shorten.

The first omen came in the form of a fish during the extravagant display that Chinese President Xi Jinping arranged for G20 leaders in Hangzhou last Sunday night, where the dinner was followed by a medley of national ballads — including *Waltzing Matilda* — and boat tours of the famous West Lake to watch fireworks.

The Australian Prime Minister was on a boat with British Prime Minister Theresa May and their Italian counterpart Matteo Renzi when a carp leapt out of the water and landed at their feet, flapping on the deck. One account has it that May and Turnbull looked on unperturbed as Renzi, with the flick of a football player, kicked the fish over the gunwale and into the water. The Chinese hosts assured all three that this gift from the lake was a sure sign of future success — something they all need given that Renzi took office in 2014, Turnbull last year and May after the Brexit vote this year.

The second gift required no superstition to guess its message. The resignation of Sam Dastyari on Wednesday was just what Turnbull needed after Labor's dominant start to the new parliament. Now the Coalition is all smiles. No longer does the government frontbench have a monopoly on the art of aiming a pistol at one's foot. The aggressive and relentless Labor machine, which has inflicted so much damage on Turnbull this year, finally had a setback. Labor has shown before that it can regroup quickly, not least when it bounced back from losing the election, and it may do so again before Monday. Even so, the poor handling of the Dastyari mess shows that Shorten and his advisers have the same flaws they claim to see in Turnbull. Rather than acting quickly to limit the political damage from Dastyari's link to Chinese donors, Shorten looked as if he were defending the indefensible, out of touch and indecisive.

The Opposition Leader also has lost some of the power in his demand for a royal commission into the banks. Dastyari was a real force in that campaign. He led the charge against corporate corruption. Now he is tainted by money from mysterious business interests linked to an opaque foreign government. Labor's quest for accountability and transparency in banking will be more challenging. Turnbull landed a blow on Shorten with one of the political lines of the week. "I'm here standing up for Australia. Back home, Bill Shorten is standing up for Sam Dastyari," he said on Monday.

The contrast worked because Turnbull actually was standing up for the country. He had a successful summit season at the G20 in China and the East Asia Summit in Laos. He may continue this today at the Pacific Islands Forum in Pohnpei. Not every meeting has been friendly but there have been far more gains than losses.

The great rebuke of the week, where Xi urged Turnbull to continue a "fair, transparent and predictable" approach to foreign investment, remains a matter of dispute. The Chinese displeasure seemed clear in the briefing from the country's foreign ministry, but the Australian side thought this was overblown. Turnbull stuck to his position and adopted John Howard's pugnacious rhetoric: "We decide who invests in Australia and the circumstances in which they invest." The sense of a clash with China did him no harm.

Turnbull's meeting with Vladimir Putin was grim. The Russian President was scornful of the West's strategies in the Middle East across more than a decade — toppling Saddam Hussein and creating chaos in Iraq, then countering Bashar al-Assad and doing the same in Syria. An Australian source says Putin insisted Russia was fighting for the legitimate Syrian government. "Who are you fighting for?" he asked Turnbull. There was no easy answer. Putin spoke to Turnbull of a "transition, not a revolution" in Syria that would produce a political solution that might lead to democracy. Is this really possible? The Russian leader is responsible for extending the bloodshed, adding to the toll of 500,000 dead and refusing this week's attempt by Barack Obama to get aid to parts of the battlefield. Yet his remarks make it more obvious than ever that a military strategy alone will not end the conflict.

Turnbull was ridiculed a year ago for emphasising a political solution in Syria. Andrew Bolt likened him to British prime minister Neville Chamberlain for talking of a "power-sharing" deal and a "political settlement" that included the Sunni population that was disenfranchised and drawn to Islamic State. Some thought this meant a deal with Islamic State, something Turnbull never said. At the same time, it was controversial when Julie Bishop said Assad might need to be part of a transition. One year later, the idea of putting more troops into Syria to win a ground war has even fewer supporters. There is more talk of a political solution. The message from G20 members was clear. May, not exactly a left-leaning leader, said the aim was a "political situation" in Syria. "The goal remains a negotiated settlement which delivers stability for all Syrians, and a government with whom we can work to defeat the terrorists," she said this week. Does that make her a Chamberlain too?

It turns out that Turnbull's judgment was sound one year ago. The dispute over a political settlement was exaggerated at the time of last year's G20 in Turkey and looks even more so today. Australia will increase its attacks on Islamic State under Turnbull, thanks to changes to the rules of engagement he outlined last week, but the military alone will not end this nightmare.

Shorten has had a bad week; Turnbull has had a good one. Things have not turned out this way very often across the 51 weeks since Turnbull toppled Tony Abbott. The question is whether the Prime Minister can hold his advantage and hammer his opponent. He will need more than good luck and good omens.

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