

DIS-CON NOTES

John Stone

THE NEXT ABBOTT MINISTRY

Writing here on October 1 last, I said: ‘The Liberal Party now desperately needs a leader who, while maintaining its “broad church”, can do two things: regain the votes of all those “Dis-Cons” who, according to Mark Textor, “had nowhere else to go” on July 2 last, but who showed him, in spades, that they did; and who possesses the fundamental decency to bind up the wounds within the parliamentary party created by last year’s coup’. Malcolm Turnbull, I said, ‘is capable of neither’.

Seven weeks later, the truth of that has become obvious. As the *Australian*’s Phillip Hudson said of a recent Newspoll: ‘Barely four months after scraping home to win the... election, it is grim news for Turnbull’. It is not just that Turnbull is a Left-leaning politician trying to appeal to a Right-of-centre electorate. Even if he possessed outstanding political skills, that would be difficult enough. The truth however is that, as shown throughout the election campaign, and since underlined in episode after episode (including on two election nights, his own and Trump’s), Turnbull is just no good at politics. If he leads the Coalition to the next election, we will have a Labor government. So, as that earlier article said, ‘the party’s first conclusion has to be, get rid of him; and with that once agreed, the sooner the better’.

As the *Australian* recently acknowledged, ‘There is no evidence that Mr Abbott is undermining his leader’. (He has no need to; barely a day goes by without Turnbull doing so himself). However, that does not mean that, if asked by his party room, Abbott would decline to resume the leadership of which he was, last year, so treacherously deprived. On the contrary, and all questions of *schadenfreude* aside, he would rightly regard it as his duty to do so. Against that eventuality, therefore – now only a matter of time – I have thought about the composition of the next Abbott ministry.

In forming that ministry, the first essential for Abbott will be to keep in mind the second of those two aforementioned *desiderata*: the need to ‘bind up the wounds within the parliamentary party created by last year’s coup’. Clearly, his ministry could not include the two key conspirators (Turnbull and Julie Bishop); but them apart, what of the rest?

The current Turnbull ministry, 42 in number, is patently too large. It contains 30 Ministers and 12 others who, previously designated Parliamentary Secretaries, have had their egos stroked by now being called ‘Assistant Ministers’. Of those 30 real Ministers, 23 are in the Cabinet and seven in the outer ministry. By any standards, a Cabinet of 23 is far too large. Ideally, it ought not to exceed (say) 15 or 16; and although that pass has long since been sold, Abbott could at least reduce it to (say) 20.

As noted, both Turnbull and Bishop must go. Turnbull’s only honourable course will be to resign from Parliament (the government need not fear a by-election in his seat of Wentworth). To adapt Lady Bracknell, to be dumped by his party once could be seen as a misfortune; to be dumped by his party twice is definitive. As for Bishop, as my earlier *Speccie* article mentioned, she ‘is already preparing the ground for exiting the Parliament before the next election, seeking a job for the girls somewhere within the United Nations and its appurtenances’. In her seat (Curtin) also, a by-election presents no difficulties. The three surviving members of ‘the Hendy cabal’ – Senators Sinodinos, Fifield and Ryan – present a problem, the more so since Sinodinos and Fifield are now in the Cabinet. They would have to accept some downgrading from their present unduly elevated positions – it is not, after all, that any of them has performed brilliantly in those positions so far – but although it would be tempting for Tony Abbott to dismiss them neck and crop, that would risk breaching that second *desideratum*. So, swallowing hard, he should retain Sinodinos, Fifield and Ryan all as members of the outer ministry.

A somewhat similar dilemma arises over Scott Morrison. In my June 11 *Speccie* piece, I said of him: ‘Although formally voting for Abbott last September (and making an ostentatiously duplicitous show of doing so), it is an open secret that he swung his half-dozen or so NSW “mates” behind the Turnbull plotters – without whose support, indeed, the latter may not have felt confident enough to proceed’. Like the three Senators, he too has not performed well as Treasurer. That said, Abbott should retain Morrison, but switch his portfolio with that of Christian Porter, who currently occupies the same portfolio (Social Services) as that occupied by Morrison pre-coup. Porter was Treasurer (as well as, simultaneously, Attorney-General) in WA’s Barnett government, and a switch between the two men would be entirely rational. Yes, it would represent a (small) demotion for Morrison but, all things considered, he would be getting off lightly.

So much for those on the ‘wrong’ side of the ledger. On the ‘right’ side, Kevin Andrews needs to be brought back (as Minister for Foreign Affairs in place of Bishop?) and Eric Abetz also, as government Leader in the Senate in place of George Brandis, who may well exit the Senate soon anyway as part of moves associated with the retirement in February of the High Court’s Chief Justice.

In short, the next Abbott ministry needs to see a small number of departures and a few other reshuffles; but in the interest of binding up the wounds that even the minor players helped create, the over-riding rule must be ‘no pay-back’ against those still tarred with ‘the Mark of Cain’. With that accomplished, and the ‘Dis-Cons’ flooding back, the new Abbott government can begin to turn its once again formidable broadsides upon Bill Shorten’s Opposition – a hulk so vulnerable that it currently only remains afloat courtesy of Turnbull’s dithering ineptitude.