

Rare air on planet Malcolm Turnbull turns failure to success

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The Prime Minister is becoming an expert at seeming rather than doing. Malcolm Turnbull is so keen to rattle off the supposed achievements of his government that the fact most of the items he lists are complete catastrophes doesn't faze him at all. He is the classic post-truth leader. The trouble for him is that post-truth leaders are so yesterday.

Take some of his claimed triumphs since becoming Prime Minister. He crows about the abolition of the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal when the instinct of his minister was to delay the offending order of the tribunal rather than to abolish the agency outright. If it were not for the efforts of now departed senator Glenn Lazarus, it is doubtful that we would have seen the back of this tribunal, one set up explicitly to favour the Transport Workers Union and to force owner-drivers out of business.

Turnbull boasts about the passing of the omnibus savings bill but doesn't mention that these budget savings were already on the books. Even so, some of the savings were trimmed by the Senate and so the budget gap now is worse than the figures presented in the last budget.

And, let's face it, the Coalition government has come close to complete incompetence when it comes to repairing the budget deficit, notwithstanding its self-belief that Coalition governments are inherently superior economic and fiscal managers than Labor.

Take a look at the figures. The deficit for this financial year — a period that covers Scott Morrison's first budget and Turnbull's first (financial) year as Prime Minister — is expected to be about \$37 billion. It's a pathetic effort and amounts to 25.8 per cent of gross domestic product, which is the same ratio as the previous year. Using the most optimistic assumptions about the growth of nominal GDP as well as company and income tax receipts, there is an expectation that the budget deficit could shrink to \$6bn by 2019-20 or 25.2 per cent of GDP.

The obvious response is: "Tell 'im he's dreamin'." It's not going to happen and Turnbull knows it.

The Prime Minister is committed to increasing government spending on his pet projects and he has no appetite for making hard decisions on crimping welfare spending or stopping pork-barrel type spending, particularly in the regions and in South Australia.

He is even continuing to spruik the government's unaffordable plan to increase spending on childcare. It is running at \$8bn a year and Turnbull's proposal is to lift this to \$10bn. If you are concerned about the rorts in childcare spending now, just hang on to your hat. One part of the government's plan is to transfer the payment of childcare subsidies to the centres rather than direct the fee relief to the parents in the first instance. This is just a recipe for a much higher incidence of fraud, something we have witnessed in the family daycare space, which has grown by more than 60 per cent in two years compared with 7 per cent in centres.

And while we are talking about fraud and wasteful spending, the holes in the welfare system are like a gigantic Swiss cheese. But this government has achieved virtually nothing about this worrying development, apart from observing and waiting.

There has been a substantial expansion in the number of people on the Carer Payment but the government hasn't attempted to hold back the tide and the associated expenses. And compliance in the welfare system is a joke. It has been reported that there was not a single person on the Newstart Allowance last year who was penalised by way of cessation of or reduced benefits for a breach of the work test. You can't tell me that everyone on the Newstart Allowance is genuinely looking for work and always turns up for interviews.

The fact it took so long for the government to act on the obvious rorting that was occurring in the VET FEE-HELP space is just staggering. In what was an obvious blunder by the Gillard government, it was clear early on that the combination of poorly regulated private vocational colleges, unregulated fees and vulnerable, poorly informed students would lead to a fiscal catastrophe. In 2012, the value of new VET FEE-HELP loans was \$325 million. Last year — after the Coalition had been in office for more than two years — the value of new loans was \$3bn. There were several worried responsible ministers in that period, but effectively nothing was done until late this year.

Getting back to the Prime Minister's list of achievements, he almost always mentions superannuation. Actually, all that has been achieved is the passing of an enormous wad of complex legislation that will come back to haunt the government very soon. One piece of legislation is 500 pages long, with 270 pages on the issue of the treatment of defined benefit superannuants. Even the experts can't understand it and there is no way the deadlines can be met.

And in one of those insulting, condescending but uninformative letters that parliamentarians send in response to a letter from a constituent, the Prime Minister (written by someone else, of course) now refers to "broadly commensurate" treatment across the superannuation system between accumulation and defined benefit accounts. Hint: don't do the spreadsheets because this is not what it shows.

Turnbull and his ministers just don't get it. Constituents write letters asking for specific advice and all they get back is misleading, syrupy mush that could be set to music. In this specific response, the author refers to the objective of superannuation, which is not actually settled — a serious mistake. The letter then ends with this mawkish piece of sludge: "This package will make it possible for Australians to manage their superannuation and plan their retirement with confidence, while strengthening the foundation of the superannuation system for Australia's future." And to think the taxpayer is paying for someone to write this drivel. What Turnbull needs to recognise is the existence of baseball bats and angry people who are not appeased when asking specific questions, only to be fobbed off by teenage-like essays that would be given an F.

Then we come to the final two items on Turnbull's list of triumphs — the Registered Organisations Commission and the Australian Building and Construction Commission. The

ROC is not really a big deal and the vexed issue of state trade unions covered under state legislation is basically unresolved. Most of the corrupt activities of union officials have occurred at a state or branch level and the ROC may have a hard time getting to the bottom of misconduct other than at the national level.

The neutered ABCC is a total joke. Sorry, a win is not a win. This is a case of a win is a loss. The amendments the government accepted have turned a body that could have served a useful role, particularly in combination with the code for government-funded building projects, into a lame duck with expensive, onerous and protectionist appendages.

If the Prime Minister doesn't understand this, he is the wrong person to lead the country.

My guess is that most people have very low expectations of governments. They do, however, expect them to safeguard the use of taxpayers' money and to talk to them in frank and honest terms. The Turnbull government is failing on both fronts.