

Biff was a good show but PM must punch on



Malcolm Turnbull speaking in the House of Representatives.

Laurie Oakes, Herald Sun, February 11, 2017 12:00am

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MALCOLM Turnbull's massive Parliamentary bollocking of Bill Shorten came in the nick of time. His party was on the point of giving up on him.

That does not mean that there was any serious discussion under way about a leadership change. Most Liberals still believe another coup would be electoral folly.

But a thick cloud of despondency had settled over the Coalition. A consensus was building that the cause was hopeless and there was no way the government could climb out of its political hole.

Shock treatment was required. Turnbull's angry, highly personal attack on the Opposition Leader provided it. Ugly the speech might have been, but it provided the reset the PM so desperately needed.

That evening Turnbull was cheered loudly at drinks in the whip's office with backbenchers who had been depressed and desperate a few hours earlier.

Some of the reviews of his performance were ridiculously enthusiastic. Comparisons with Julia Gillard's misogyny speech, for example, were over the top. Millions of people viewed Gillard's speech on YouTube. So far, Turnbull's has attracted only a few thousand views. Also, while Turnbull's aggression was effective — Shorten certainly knew he'd been hit — the suggestion that anything in the speech was on a par with Paul Keating's famous one-liners is risible.

Take Keating's "Can a souffle rise twice?" comment when Andrew Peacock returned to the Liberal leadership, or his description of Peter Costello as "All tip and no iceberg" or his unforgettable reply when John Hewson asked why he would not call an immediate election: "Because I want to do you slowly."

All those lines had political power, but they were witty, not spiteful.

Turnbull delivered some powerful lines, too, but they were built around insult rather than wit. There is nothing very clever about "this simpering sycophant" or "this man is a parasite". The nearest he got to wit was to describe Shorten as "blowing hard in the House of Representatives, sucking hard in the living rooms of Melbourne". Paul Keating he ain't.

But Coalition MPs loved the Turnbull take-down of Shorten and were surprised someone supposedly down and out could cut such a commanding figure in the parliament. And not just because it boosted morale. The Labor leader has led a charmed life, allowed by the Coalition to dictate terms.



Bill Shorten in the House of Representatives. Picture: Kym Smith

The combination of standing up to a bullying US President and then doing Shorten over in a bare-knuckle brawl in the House should go some way towards countering the jellyback image that has been so damaging.

There were claims the speech was scripted, and even suggestions that others had a part in its authorship, but it was all Turnbull and completely spontaneous.

It had been rehearsed, though, in the sense that some of the lines had been tried out off-Broadway and the Prime Ministerial fury that gave them force had been building up in the days before the parliamentary clash. The previous week, after the revelation of his \$1.75

million election donation to the Liberal Party, Turnbull's jaw clenched and his face reddened as he attacked Shorten for engaging in "the politics of envy".

It was a Shorten reference to "Mr Harbourside Mansion" that set him off then, just as it was in the House. Suddenly the richest man in Parliament has become supersensitive about his wealth.

The reason is not clear. When, early in his prime ministership, Labor tried to use his wealth against him, Turnbull handled it calmly. But then he was riding high. Now he is under pressure and his response to pressure has always been to lash out.

This time it paid off as he savaged Shorten for sucking up to millionaires while proclaiming concern for battlers. But the point Shorten was making before Turnbull erupted will not go away — namely, that the government is using legislation to boost childcare as cover for making cuts to family payments and paid parental leave.

And, more broadly, that a wealthy Prime Minister out of touch with people at the lower end of the income scale is presiding over policies that help the rich and hurt the less privileged. One intensely personal speech bagging the Opposition Leader might take the heat off Turnbull for a while, but it will not solve the problem for the PM in the longer term.

He needs to apply the same passion and rhetorical skill to explaining his policies and disproving Labor's case.

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