

DIS-CON NOTES

John Stone

14 AND COUNTING

As the Parliament resumed last Monday for its final sitting prior to the winter recess, Newspill again showed the Coalition still trailing Labor, for the 14th successive time.

The last Dis-Con Note (29/04/17) mentioned that journalists – particularly Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s coterie – often remark that his infamous justification for toppling an elected first-term Prime Minister was 30 successive adverse Newspolls; thus, they argue, Turnbull still has plenty of leeway. However, they should ‘recall that when that spill motion was moved in the Liberal party room on February 7, 2015 “the Newspill count” had then only registered 16 successive adverse results’. So on Monday that Newspill meant that we are approaching that earlier tipping point.

Since that earlier Note, two further reasons for keeping that tipping point in mind have emerged. First, on May 9 we had a Budget that, in a desperate effort to break that Newspill sequence, trashed every principle for which Menzies’s party was supposed to stand; yet three Newspolls later, there has been no ‘polling dividend’. The Coalition primary vote has been stuck on an election-wipe-out 36 per cent for five successive polls, while the two-party preferred position remains at 47 per cent versus Labor’s 53 per cent – an outcome that would lose the Coalition 13 seats in the House of Representatives and some also in the Senate. As noted in my letter to the *Australian* almost four months ago (28/02/17), ‘Turnbull is unelectable: people have simply stopped listening to him’.

The second reason is that, as the continuing party room stoush over energy policy has again demonstrated, the personal relationship between Turnbull and Tony Abbott has now deteriorated to the point where, to quote that earlier Dis-Con Note, ‘if both men remain in the Parliament, the Liberals will not merely lose the next election; they will be slaughtered’. However, ‘Abbott has made it clear he is not going anywhere’; hence, ‘if the

Liberal Party is to survive, Turnbull must leave the Parliament. There is no escaping that conclusion’.

Even some journalists notable for their anti-Abbott animus appear to be coming to related views. The *Australian*’s Peter van Onselen, a long standing Abbott-hater, recently discussed (‘Containing the deficit comes down to political games’, 3-4/06/17) a scenario in which, ‘in the second half of next year, it would be incumbent on him [Turnbull] to step aside’. (This fantasy of a supreme narcissist voluntarily taking such a course was rendered even more delusory by van Onselen’s choice of successor in Julie Bishop, a.k.a. the Liberal Party’s Lady Macbeth!). Niki Savva, also writing for the *Australian* and whose Abbott-hatred ailment approaches clinical dimensions, recently went down an almost equally ludicrous path to rid Turnbull of Abbott by suggesting, through clenched teeth, that he should appoint him as Governor-General. Meanwhile the notably hard-headed Graham Richardson says (31/05/17): ‘The very same bedwetters who unseated Abbott... are once again buying nappies’. After all, ‘a new leader does not guarantee success but holds out the prospect of being in the contest with some chance of winning’. Quite so.

Enough is enough. If Turnbull is to go – and go he must if the Coalition is to have any chance in 2019 – then the sooner he goes, the more time his successor will have to put things right. So who should that successor be?

Readers will know I have continued to believe the Coalition’s best chance at the next election will be by restoring Abbott as its Leader. A different choice, hailing from the party’s right (Peter Dutton?), would be enough to see many Dis-Cons stream back into the Liberal’s corner; but if the choice were Abbott, that stream would become a flood.

Like him or loathe him, Abbott towers head and shoulders over anyone else in the Liberal party room, whether seen from a domestic policy viewpoint or as international statesman. The Morrisons, Pynes, Hunts, etc. are pygmies in comparison, while the various ‘young hopes’

(headed by Angus Taylor) are not yet ready.

Against that background, will the Liberal party room go on deluding itself that all is not (yet) lost? Or, while admitting that under Turnbull’s leadership it is headed for the knacker’s yard, will it judge another leadership change’s ‘transition costs’ would make things worse? Or will it finally accept that, under a new Leader who would bring back many or all of us Dis-Cons (who, believe me, are not coming back otherwise) it could still either win in 2019 against a Labor leader who is actually very vulnerable or, at the very least, save much of the furniture?

That last, remember, was what led a Rudd-hating Labor party room to return Kevin Rudd to the prime ministership in 2013, enabling him to save 10-15 seats in the ensuing election. Indeed, the parallels between Labor then and the Coalition now are uncanny. With a leader, Julia Gillard, to whom the voters had stopped listening, and facing a catastrophic electoral wipe-out, a Labor party room whose hatred of Kevin Rudd far exceeded the anti-Abbott attitudes now harboured by the 37 guilty men and women still remaining in the Liberal party room, nevertheless recalled Rudd to save some of their bacon.

They did so for two reasons. A significant segment of Labor’s voters had been deeply offended by their party’s treacherous dismissal of a first-term PM, and Rudd’s return would bring many of them back; and unlike Gillard (read Turnbull), Rudd (read Abbott) was a formidable campaigner. The only criticism of Labor’s then decision was that it came far too late. Rudd could never have won, but given more time he could have saved even more seats.

Two Newspolls hence, when ‘the Newspill count’ reaches that 16 successive adverse mark (as it will), somebody, as in early 2015, has to step up.

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