

## **Losing the argument from inside the winner's circle**

Editorial, The Australian, 12:00AM July 1, 2017

On this day a year ago Malcolm Turnbull created a minor election eve kerfuffle on the campaign trail. The Prime Minister had booked some one-on-one radio and television interviews but journalists sensed he was planning to avoid the traditional final day press conference. After delivering a stump speech in the seat of Reid in Sydney's west, Mr Turnbull faced shouts of indignation from one reporter and he convened a media event later that day. One of the questions contrasted Bill Shorten's final day "campaigning blitz" with the Prime Minister's "relatively quiet" schedule, asking if this meant he thought the election was "in the bag". Mr Turnbull disagreed. "This is a very close election," he said. "No one can take it for granted." On the same day a Liberal Party social media initiative on Snapchat backfired when many posts ridiculed the party.

Exactly one year on, with the Coalition persistently trailing in the polls, government disunity dominating the news cycle and the Prime Minister struggling to carry the conversation, there is a sense of *deja vu* about the communication strategy. While the Opposition Leader is crisscrossing the nation in campaign mode, conducting press conferences most days, Mr Turnbull has been more circumspect. There was no first anniversary media conference to discuss the Coalition's achievements, or a speech, or an anniversary event. The Prime Minister instead visited a school, broadcast on social media and held a Facebook Live event with Tony Abrahams, who has developed voice-recognition caption technology. Mr Turnbull first played broadcast journalist, interviewing Mr Abrahams about his "great example of the innovation culture", then fielded online questions. Many focused on energy prices. "Gosh a lot on electricity today," Mr Turnbull lamented, "not enough on voice recognition."

The Coalition and the nation face greater challenges than the Prime Minister's communication strategy. Yet when the government needs to spruik and defend its \$23.5 billion education package, convince consumers and industry it has a plan to tackle steeply rising electricity costs, reassure the public about economic and national security, and encourage unity of purpose within its own ranks, its ability to marshal national debate is crucial. Mr Turnbull is not succeeding at this task. One reason is the constant and deliberate distractions provided by his leadership nemesis, Tony Abbott, who has been weighing in on policy issues with arguments that are plausible but run counter to what he did when he led the government. Still, Mr Turnbull should not allow these interventions to dissuade him from engaging with the public; they make it more important for him to advocate with intent. Facebook Live chats on niche issues just won't cut it when households and businesses are fretting over debilitating power price rises.

One way to silence Mr Abbott's broad-ranging musings — set to continue this weekend — would be to promote him to cabinet. Defence Minister Marise Payne and Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne have hardly covered themselves in glory, so appointing the former prime minister as a traditionally singular defence minister would be a sensible option that would keep him busy, focused and working to the benefit of the team. But it won't happen. Mr Turnbull has made his intentions clear; he has chosen instead to tolerate Mr Abbott as a dissenting backbench voice. Fair enough; as long as the Prime Minister does not allow this to cramp his style.

Mr Turnbull attempted to focus on infrastructure projects in Victoria and his Snowy expansion scheme this week but succeeded mainly in airing his frustrations. “I understand the media’s fascination with personalities,” he said on Wednesday. “But I’ll tell you, the only personalities I’m interested in are 24 million Australians. My job and my government’s job is to deliver for them. Australians are bored, fed up with journalists and politicians talking about themselves.” He was right, of course, but he probably was wrong to say so. It is not effective to tell people about your communication tactics; what is much more important is to implement them. Admonishing journalists for asking about internal disruption is a sure way to inflame the issues rather than move the debate on. Strong leaders and experienced communicators will steer the conversation in the direction of the public interest without giving voice to their annoyance. The public expects their politicians just to get on with it. The nation craves leadership. Few voters will expect easy solutions to complex ongoing challenges around energy, taxation, climate, immigration, security and defence policies. But they want to know the government has a plan and is concentrating on the issues that matter most. A government that is caught up all week on controversy springing from drink-fuelled factional triumphalism in a Sydney bar gives the impression of a team with too little on its plate rather than too much.