

## Liberal Party's future may rest in conservative hands of Tony Abbott



Artwork: Eric Lobbecke.

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The Liberal Party is in deep trouble. It is struggling to regain credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of a justifiably sceptical electorate. Blaming former prime minister Tony Abbott's recent thought-leadership as materially contributing to its present woes is to trivialise and misread the deep cultural and intellectual differences now fracturing the organisation at so many levels. Indeed, the Liberal brand is so badly damaged that the party's survival is in question. Adopting a "nothing to see here" stance signals the party is either out of touch or taking voters for fools.

Malcolm Turnbull's unconscionable acts of treachery in white-anting opposition leader Brendan Nelson and toppling newly elected prime minister Abbott have left much bad blood. The political class may think this behaviour is acceptable but it is at odds with community standards and not forgotten. It robs the Prime Minister and the government of moral authority.

Of course Turnbull did not plot Abbott's overthrow alone. His co-conspirators are still in the leadership team and some are boasting that the party's left now controls the "winners' circle". Obviously the Prime Minister is in that winners'

circle, which may explain why he seemed uneasy with traditional Liberal Party values in his recent London speech. Demonstrating unrestrained narcissism, Turnbull sought to remake his party's founder, Sir Robert Menzies, in his own image. Turnbull argues that the Liberals were never a conservative party and that Menzies had purposely rejected traditional conservative politics because, at the time, "the authoritarian right had no appeal". That's intellectually disingenuous. Menzies abhorred all tyranny and was, at heart, a classical liberal.

Indeed, Menzies' views are clearly expressed in a 1974 letter lamenting that the "State executive is dominated by what we now call Liberals with a small l — that is to say who believe in nothing, but who believe in anything if they think it is worth a few votes. The whole thing is tragic."

Menzies would have viewed Turnbull as fitting this description. Turnbull is fashionably left. He's for big government and climate change. He's drawn to identity politics and same-sex marriage, is pro-choice and a republican. Freedom of speech, he says, "will not build an extra road". On fiscal policy, he argues "it's better to be fair than in the black". He supports generous welfare and high wages. He equivocates on IR reform and deregulation. If this is Turnbull's "sensible centre", it differs from Labor only at the margins.

The British editor of *The Spectator*, Fraser Nelson, writes: "If (Conservatives are) not insurgents against failed vested interests and uncaring government, if they're unconvinced by the need to promote individual freedom and social cohesion, if they don't really believe in competition ... then why vote Tory? Their answer, for years, has been: because the other lot are even worse." For Tory, read Liberal.

This is why Tony Abbott's latest interventions are timely. But, as is the habit these days, it's easier to demonise the messenger than consider the content, particularly if the author is the former prime minister. Better such heresy be whispered behind closed doors or not uttered at all.

Tony Abbott is not small-l Liberal and his manifesto is sensible. He correctly argues that "the next election can only be won by drawing up new battle lines that give our people something to fight for, and the public something to hope for: To take the pressure off cost of living, let's stop subsidies for new wind power. To take the pressure off housing, let's scale back immigration. To get the budget under control, let's ban new spending. To keep us safe, let's make

sure there are no known jihadis loose on our streets. And to get good government, not gridlock, let's reform the Senate as soon as we possibly can."

Abbott's ideas have broad appeal. His is certainly a stronger call to arms than the party's present battle cry, which, at heart, simply warns voters that the other side would be worse. This overlooks the reality that many born since the 1990s have been educated not to be horrified by the prospect of socialist governments. Indeed, to paraphrase Fraser Nelson, a new generation has emerged to whom socialism seems like a new idea — not an old debunked one. And anyway, if you lean to the left, why not vote for the real thing and be done with it?

Unfortunately for the champions of change, a lack of philosophical conviction, let alone the ability to deliver a Menzian narrative, are not confined to the parliamentary party. Like Menzies observed in 1974, the machine is populated by "progressives" and their preferences are reflected in the new members they pre-select. Malcolm Turnbull uses the weight of the prime ministerial office to assist more "moderates" (read leftists), to enter parliament. With "conservatives" increasingly in marginal seats, after the next election, the party left will dominate the policy agenda.

Unless the Liberal Party rediscovers its core beliefs and political direction, it is likely to suffer Labor's long years of horrors when, because of irreconcilable philosophical differences, the Democratic Labor Party was formed to keep it out of office.

With the defection of Cory Bernardi to the Australian Conservatives, the Liberal Party split has begun. One Nation, the Liberal Democrats and Australian Conservatives are attracting Liberal voters, members and financial support. Declining rank and file membership means less influence, less funding, fewer Liberal MPs and, then, irrelevance.

The Liberal Party should not underestimate the harm being done to its image. The spotlight may be on federal politics but the brand damage cannot be contained. Abbott may not be popular inside the beltway or the inner city, but he enjoys widespread support among Menzies' "forgotten people". Like him or not, he may be the Liberals' last chance.