

Malcolm Turnbull coaches Theresa May: 'Be optimistic, be confident'

AFR, Phillip Coorey, July 13

Malcolm Turnbull has cited the Coalition's precarious hold on government and having to deal with an unwieldy Senate when advising the similarly-embattled British government not to "nave gaze" but to govern as if it had a 100-seat majority.

During a private dinner in London Tuesday night, attended by five senior members of Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's cabinet plus other leading conservatives, Mr Turnbull was asked for advice after last month's snap election backfired and reduced the British government to minority status.

Mrs May's leadership is under constant question by both her colleagues and the media and the government has lost authority, casting into doubt its ability to negotiate Brexit. Giving unique insight into how he approaches government with a one-seat majority, a messy Senate and, to a lesser extent, speculation about his leadership, Mr Turnbull advised the British to put their heads down and govern.



Malcolm Turnbull has cited the Coalition's precarious hold on government when advising the British government to govern as if it had a 100-seat majority. Andrew Meares

But he warned social media-driven outrage made governing today much harder.

"Be optimistic, be confident," he said, according to sources familiar with the event.

Mr Turnbull compared Mrs May's slim majority – achieved by forming a ruling coalition with the minority Democratic Unionist Party – to his own one-seat majority and a Senate crossbench that spanned the entire political spectrum. Moreover, he warned governments in this situation had to accept that the media would be against them, in part due to the new "outrage cycle of social media politics".

As social media gains at the expense of troubled, established media, the media in general won't be against the current government in particular, but against any government.

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"They just want to get the next lot in, whoever they may be," Mr Turnbull was quoted as saying.

In such circumstances, government have no option but to focus on governing and doing the job of government. Mr Turnbull cited his government's mounting successes in passing legislation through the Senate, such as the industrial relations bills used as triggers at the last double dissolution election, and, more recently, the Gonski 2.0 reforms.

Those in attendance at the dinner included cabinet ministers Michael Fallon, Liam Fox, Michael Gove, Richard Harrington and Damian Green, the British equivalent of deputy prime minister. Mr Turnbull also offered similar advice to Mrs May when they met privately beforehand.

Mr Turnbull also delivered a similar message to a closed business breakfast held on Wednesday, just before he left. Those at the breakfast, including about 20 of the UK's leading business figures, expressed concern at the state of government and the implications for Brexit.

Mr Turnbull's message behind closed doors dovetailed with a thought-provoking speech he gave to centre-right think-tank the Policy Exchange, in which he questioned the worth any more of such labels as conservative or libertarian and said governments could not be driven by ideology. "Is it conservative to support free trade and open markets as Theresa May and I did today – or call for more protection as many on both the self styled "liberal left" and "conservative right" in the US do today?" he asked..

"The truth is that the labels have lost almost all meaning in the furious outrage cycle of social media politics, long cast adrift to be appropriated, often cynically, by one politician or another as it suits their purpose."

Following a successful week abroad, which began at the G20 in Hamburg, Germany, included a stopover in Paris before spending three days in London, Mr Turnbull visited the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Before the meeting, Mr Turnbull, the nation's most senior republican, repeated his longstanding view that there could be no move towards a republic while Her Majesty was still on the throne. "I would say most Australian republicans, are Elizabethans as well," he said.

It is understood he raised with Her Majesty the return to Australia of the letters sent to her by disgraced former governor-general John Kerr regarding the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam government.