

## Malcolm Turnbull's plotters find political success elusive



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Mal Brough vanished. Wyatt Roy sells call centre technology. Peter Hendy wants a Senate seat. James McGrath is in ministerial limbo land. Arthur Sinodinos stays quiet. Scott Ryan is struck out sick. Simon Birmingham is at war with the Catholic Church. Mitch Fifield tried to buy media peace from One Nation.

They have been dubbed the G8: the eight Liberals most intimately involved in the successful plot to remove Tony Abbott as prime minister.

When they installed Malcolm Turnbull party leader on September 14, 2015, all might have seen their political careers flourishing under what many people expected at the time to be a unifying, inspiring and competent prime minister. Instead, their stories in some ways personify the broader story of the Liberal government: starting with such promise, they have mostly either proved to be disappointments or failed to live up to their early promise. An opinion poll published Monday shows the Labor Party would easily win power based on current voting preferences.

### Fateful decision

When they gathered on the evening of September 13, 2015, at Hendy's home in Queanbeyan, on the outskirts of Canberra, the atmosphere was thick with anticipation. The group, excluding Birmingham, who was flying up from Adelaide, took the fateful decision to remove a first-term leader who had ended six years of Labor power.

The next day, Roy, Hendy, Brough, Ryan, Sinodinos and Fifield walked briskly alongside Turnbull to the meeting in Parliament House where they brought down Abbott, triggering open conflict between the two main wings of the party that persists today.

Some observers thought Turnbull wouldn't risk offending Abbott's supporters through a wholesale overhaul of cabinet. They were wrong. Every member of the G8 was promoted. Several top Abbott ministers were dispatched to the backbench, where their resentment towards the government festered.

No ministers epitomised the new regime better than Wyatt Roy. At an age when many young men are still learning to cook, the 25-year-old became Assistant Minister for Innovation. The job made Roy the public face of Turnbull's nebulous plan to turn Australia into a technological leader. Roy relished the profile, and quickly picked up the Silicon Valley lingo.

## Unimpressed voters

His electors in Queensland's Moreton Bay region weren't so impressed. Perceived to have neglected his electorate, Roy was thrown out of Parliament at the 2016 election. He went on a long holiday, witnessed a firefight in Iraq, and was recently hired as general manager for Australia and New Zealand for a US call centre company called Afiniti International Holdings. The company is classic example of technology improving an ages-old product. By matching the attributes of call-centre staff with callers through their social media profiles, Afiniti claims to improve sales by getting two people speaking who have more in common.

At least Roy, who expresses no regrets, has a chance to establish a successful post-politics career. But he isn't there yet. Afiniti, which Roy says has "almost" ten staff, hasn't signed up any local clients.

"I stand by everything we did," he says. "It's a national sport to beat up on politicians and having worked in the public and private sector I am thoroughly enjoying the private sector."

## Comeback hopeful

Older ex-politicians have fewer options. Another plotter voted out was Peter Hendy, who held the Canberra-to-the-coast seat of Eden Monaro, a marginal country seat many local Liberals felt wasn't suited for the intellectual ex-Treasury economist. After last year's election Hendy was picked up by Turnbull, who made him his economic adviser. But at 56 he wasn't interested in a long-term position in a ministerial office, even the prime minister's. He resigned a few months ago and is seeking work as an economic consultant and a board director while living in the seat of Bennelong on Sydney's Lower North Shore.

As long as former pro tennis player John Alexander holds Bennelong, Hendy says he will not challenge. But he is still eyeing off a political comeback. "If there was a vacancy on the Liberal side in the Senate I might be interested," he says. He would likely be competing with younger would-be politicians like 33-year-old Andrew Bragg, who was briefly acting director of the Liberal Party this year.

## The biggest fall

The MP who may have had the most to gain from Turnbull's ascension has taken the biggest fall. Mal Brough, a non-cabinet minister in the Howard Government, was passed over by Abbott in 2013. Turnbull made Brough Special Minister of State, a run-the-ministerial-offices job well suited to an ex-military man with a reputation as a tough and savvy operator. Brough, though, was accused of inducing an adviser to House of Representatives speaker Peter Slipper, James Ashby, to leak copies of Slipper's appointments diary as part of a campaign to take Slipper's seat, which Brough did.

A Federal Police investigation eventually cleared Brough, but he was forced to step aside from the job three months after he started. He formally lost the job last February, and didn't even bother standing for re-election.

His new life is a mystery. Brough's personal lawyer said he hadn't heard from him in a long time and thought he was involved in a tourism business in northern Queensland. Another

former contact says Brough isn't returning emails. He has had no public profile since being cleared by the AFP. Reached through a contact, Brough said he didn't want to be interviewed.

### Anti-Abbott campaign

Brough and James McGrath were two Queensland MPs who brought a hard edge to what was an little-reported but effective campaign to undermine Abbott. Some of the criticism was public. Turnbull, for instance, mocked Abbott's decision to reintroduce royal honours while pretending to praise him by citing other countries that bestowed knighthoods, including Guatemala, Peru, Argentina and Brazil.

In the background journalists were regularly briefed by Turnbull's supporters about internal missteps by Abbott, helpfully pointed to contradictions in his public comments, or simply told what terrible leader he was. Abbott's most effective media critic was an Australian columnist and former Liberal press secretary, Niki Savva, who was fed a stream of damaging stories about the arrogant behaviour towards MPs and ministers by Abbott's chief of staff, Peta Credlin. (Savva, whose husband worked for Turnbull, published a best-selling account about this period that competed with my book, *Credlin & Co., How the Abbott Government Destroyed Itself.*)

Despite often being praised for his on-the-ground political experience – he has helped run national campaigns Australia and the United Kingdom – McGrath hasn't risen above the rank of parliamentary secretary, the lowest rung on the ministerial ladder.

### Credlin concession

Now that the Turnbull government is seen by many Australians as ineffective, there is an "I told you so" attitude among the vanquished. Abbott's supporters do concede that Credlin's poor people-management skills damaged the government. "Most people are recognising that while Peta Credlin was a shocker in her treatment of different people ... that was one of the reasons Malcolm was able to tap into discontent," one pro-Abbott MP says.

Credlin was widely blamed for a leak that drove Arthur Sinodinos into Turnbull's camp. As star staff member of the Howard Government, Sinodinos' moved from the backbench to cabinet secretary under Turnbull. This year he became industry minister, where he has taken a low profile while the heavily accented Finance Minister Mathias Cormann – who voted for Abbott – has emerged as the government's leading political tactician.

Above all the other plotters, there remains bitterness among the defeated towards Sinodinos, whose great personal credibility made his criticism of the Abbott-Credlin government so potent. Abbott supporters felt that that Sinodinos' criticism of regime was motivated by revenge, after he felt he had been poorly treated by Credlin, rather than legitimate criticism of the government. "There is a sense that he [Sinodinos] poisoned the well for revenge instead of giving some of the newbies a good reason to stick," the pro-Abbott MP says. "Government wasn't as easy as we were told."

## Sick gut

Turnbull's other plotters have suffered personal and professional tribulations. Scott Ryan, the new Special Minister of State, has been forced to take leave because of complications from surgery to his stomach, a source said. Ryan is from Victoria, where the Liberal Party is so fractured that several of his fellow federal ministers didn't know the reason behind his absence apart from that it is health related. Colleagues' briefing against Ryan a few months ago led conservative firebrand Andrew Bolt to accuse the amiable minister on air of attacking Revenue and Financial Services Minister Kelly O'Dwyer, one of his closest friends in politics.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham has been forced to adopt the broad thrust of the Labor Party's education policy for political reasons. In effort to pass the Liberal Party's version of Gonski education funding, he has engaged in a fight with the Catholic Church, which is one of Abbott's core constituencies. Abbott used the policy to attack the government's performance in a meeting of Coalition MPs.

## Communicating

Communications Minister Mitch Fifield's biggest challenge is to convince the Senate to liberalise media-ownership laws. He cut a deal with One Nation at the expense of the ABC. Whether that deal holds or not – the wily Nick Xenophon who may not be eligible to sit in Parliament is next to be negotiated with – remains to be seen. Even though few Australians are concerned about the owners of their media, the change is hugely important to the industry. Fifield will likely be seen as a failure if the laws aren't changed. Fifield is also in charge of the National Broadband Network, which is proving fertile political ground for Labor. As more customers get connected to a slower-and-more-expensive-than-expected government monopoly service, the more Labor is trying to put the blame on the Coalition for making Labor's original NBN plan more modest. Fifield and the government have been struggling to counter this narrative.

The removal in 2010 of Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd – another leader accused of dysfunctional management – was described as one of the worst decisions in modern political history. Given Turnbull narrowly avoided defeat at last year, a defeat at the next election might prompt some political historians to argue that the Group of Eight led the Liberal Party into a terrible mistake.

One of them argues that history is on their side. Peter Hendy, who hosted the fateful meeting in 2015, points to unexpected victories by prime ministers Paul Keating in 1993 and John Howard in 2001. "I am happy with the decision I made," he says. "While a lot of people in the country are questioning the government, I think by the time we get to the election they will have a very, very high chance of winning."

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