

## Liberal faithful still searching for a leader

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How did it come to this for the Liberal Party, elected in a landslide not yet four years ago but seemingly divided and directionless? It has not been a sudden or recent process; the Coalition government was returned, begrudgingly, by the slenderest of margins last July.

But as the party fractures over the relatively benign issue of gay marriage (energy policy looms as more complex and polarising) we are left to consider why it has failed so badly and when the descent will end. The Liberals could reach their nadir as soon as next week, or the slide could continue into the protracted ignominy of opposition.

While Malcolm Turnbull presides over the most recent turmoil and missteps, he does not shoulder all of the blame — far from it. The chalice he conspired to steal from Tony Abbott was poisoned to begin with and he hasn't been able to deal with those legacy issues, let alone the new ones.

There is a compelling argument that the single greatest mistake made by the Liberals was to knife the prime minister who led them to power. For all his mistakes and unpopularity, Abbott had savaged Labor, won a strong endorsement from the public and promised to end the leadership merry-go-round and turmoil of Labor's Rudd-Gillard years. Abbott was far from blameless in his own demise. Broken promises, errant strategy, arrogant style and silly political mistakes wounded him, and when his colleagues put him on notice, even going so far as to call a spill without a contender, he didn't take heed.

Given their leadership history, Turnbull could hardly be blamed for harbouring designs on the top job and Abbott could never have expected immunity from his old foe's ambition. The safety buffer between the pair was the partyroom. Too many of the mainly inexperienced MPs were spooked and fell for Turnbull's Newspoll-fuelled pitch. The switch always was an unnecessary indulgence. Polls so far out from an election were near meaningless and the Coalition was on the right side of the major policy debates; and Labor was learning no lessons in opposition.

Still they did it. So two things mattered: what Turnbull was left with and what he needed to do.

Abbott had played it too safe in opposition, supporting Gonski, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and promising to quarantine major areas of the budget from cuts. This led to some broken promises that created budget mayhem and damaged the Coalition's standing. It also meant Turnbull inherited a fiscal task to be tackled with one hand tied behind the government's back.

Turnbull's ideal agenda seemed pretty clear to me from the outset. Publicly conscious of my former position as his chief of staff in opposition, many of my columns were couched as open advice. Most crucial was the need not to change policy direction.

In the first days of his leadership I argued: "The Turnbull ascension will work best if there is a focus on pushing the same policy priorities in a more engaging style." As PM he needed to

reassure his colleagues and Liberal supporters that this was “not a hostile takeover of the party by the progressive or moderate” faction. In simple terms, Turnbull had to resist any move to the left and maintain clear points of difference with Labor: “The press gallery, the ABC and all the love media will taunt and tempt Turnbull to move more quickly on climate, gay marriage and the republic. In time, along with interest groups, they will bully and admonish him for not governing true to his instincts. But he must resist the temptation of their warm embrace, weather their social media-fuelled criticisms, and keep his party united and attuned to the mainstream.”

Yet, inexorably, Turnbull has drifted down this path. And he is paying a high price.

No one would suggest his task was easy because, as outlined, Abbott left him with some time bombs. But then, he was not corralled into the job, he seized it. Coming to the job, Turnbull rightly argued the government needed an economic narrative. Abbott and treasurer Joe Hockey hadn't delivered the fiscal repair the nation needed or even convinced voters of that imperative.

But two years on, we can only conclude that Turnbull's economic narrative is either changeable or indiscernible. He has increased tax here and cut it there; he has boosted spending there while warning about expenditure growth here; and he has promised taxation and federation reform only to decide it is all too hard. Despite early promising signs he would keep the Coalition's core policy trajectory on track, the drift to the progressive left set in. Turnbull has taxed the banks, deepened the deficit, toyed with an emissions intensity scheme, embraced Gonski, fiddled with superannuation and given a nudge and a wink to those pushing for a free vote on gay marriage. There were even some early wobbles on border protection and national security before the Prime Minister sensibly hardened his resolve.

The result has been a fracturing on the right of politics, with the re-emergence of One Nation and the breakaway of Cory Bernardi. The electorate is uncertain of what the Coalition stands for and parts of the party membership are nervous, disenchanted and even walking out the door.

Within the party, the disillusionment with Turnbull's leadership is palpable, even from loyal cabinet supporters. The common lament is that no alternative exists; many MPs feel they are stuck in a dismal quandary of their own making. But survival instincts will always kick in. And while few want to admit it, Abbott looms as a temptation. Peter Dutton is often floated as an Abbott protege but why go for the copy when the original is sitting behind him, rehearsing his attack lines?

Labor held its nose and returned to Kevin Rudd because he was popular. The Liberals know Abbott is not; if they recall him it will be because they know the political pugilist will give Bill Shorten a bloodied nose.

Unthinkable as it sounds, Labor would hate it. And that's never a bad clue. The impact in seats saved could be similar — nobody really knows, or perhaps ever will.

None of this is inevitable. But Turnbull eventually needs to turn one of the political opportunities presented to him into a winner. It is by his own doing that Newspoll has become the defining measure of his performance, infuriating as it is for those of us who always argued it was overstated in the midterm Abbott assessments. A more substantial indicator is the political misjudgments.

Turnbull's election campaign never got out of first gear. Shorten was like a great white shark, dangerously aggressive, yet protected. In recent weeks when Turnbull's parliamentary confidant Christopher Pyne was exposed as having given a speech of factional triumphalism, Turnbull needed to heal the rift with conservatives but instead, in London, claimed Robert Menzies for the moderate wing.

When Shorten raised the idea of four-year terms, Turnbull was gifted a chance to slap him down and take the side of the voters against entitled politicians. Instead, he rang Shorten to discuss a bipartisan deal and had it promptly leaked against him. When his colleagues started to agitate on a free parliamentary vote on gay marriage, he needed to shut them down and double down against Labor on the plebiscite argument. Remarkably, just in the nick of time, Shorten proposed a plebiscite on the republic but his hypocrisy went unadmonished by Turnbull.

While these distractions have run throughout the winter recess, the economic narrative has been running around the top paddock wondering if it will ever be brought into the woolshed. In the partyroom next week, gay marriage is about a lot more and a lot less than the proposed marriage reform that has broad public support.

All the identity, religious and personal politics that are contested in the same-sex marriage debate have been intensified immensely by a party frustrated at its own ineptitude. Liberals are desperate to see their leader resolve a political dilemma, win a battle or frame a debate.