

Road to ruin: Liberals face the sinking feeling



Malcolm Turnbull announces he will challenge Tony Abbott for the leadership.

Niki Savva, *The Australian*, 12:00AM August 5, 2017

Possibly the eight dumbest words Malcolm Turnbull ever uttered were on September 14, 2015, the day he announced he was challenging Tony Abbott for the Liberal Party leadership. In among the many valid reasons he gave for moving against Abbott, including his failure to provide economic leadership, Turnbull said: “We have lost 30 Newspolls in a row.”

Turnbull now wishes he had never used those words. If he had his time over again, he would certainly never repeat them. But there is no going back. That glorious spring day, which ended in victory and euphoria, was always bound to turn sour. Yet in what was otherwise the most brilliantly executed plan for an execution, in what was otherwise a compelling argument for change, Turnbull, with a few ill-chosen words, planted a ticking time bomb, guaranteeing his prime ministership would be held hostage to the fortnightly Newspoll.

If nothing else, at least it has kept him on his toes.

The worst thing was that there was no need for him to say it. Not publicly anyway. Members of the G8 (the eight Liberal Party MPs behind the challenge) had been citing the polls in their spiels to MPs to convince them to vote for Turnbull. To bolster their arguments, Peter Hendy had compiled charts to show poll trajectories in the Howard years, compared to Abbott’s, after Abbott had tried to draw parallels between the two in an effort to quell disquiet and to convince MPs recovery was possible. According to Hendy’s charts, Abbott had fallen further, faster — even before the horrors of the 2014 budget — and shown none of the resilience or recovery of even the early Howard years.

Everybody knew exactly why Turnbull had set out to bring down the fifth prime minister in eight years. Abbott's leadership was terminal, his office dysfunctional, the government's position irretrievable. The majority of MPs knew, and remain convinced, that unless Abbott was removed, and his chief of staff with him, the government would be smashed at the election whenever it was held, handing victory to Bill Shorten's Labor Party.



Tony Abbott speaks at press conference following Malcolm Turnbull's challenge.

For a while it went well for Turnbull. He was riding high. There was huge relief at Abbott's departure, combined with hope about what Turnbull might offer from a revitalised government. It was never going to last. Expectations were too high, the ability to deliver constrained by previous decisions or the need to close the wounds, and the transactional cost of removing a sitting prime minister in the first term enormous.

The previous administration had left rooms full of bare cupboards, ensuring that the new Turnbull government had no policies, except dud ones from the 2014 budget, and the party had no money and no staff — a situation so dire that the ill-fated new federal director, Tony Nutt, had to work for months with no pay.

Nevertheless, Turnbull was widely criticised for not calling an early election to capitalise on his popularity. Later, Theresa May showed the folly of that strategy, even as Julia Gillard had before her. Turnbull waited until after his first budget. But periods of political chaos before that, followed by the long, cold, low-energy, lacklustre campaign, resulted in the narrowest of victories. A ratty, self-pitying speech on election night, and the resuscitation of Pauline Hanson's One Nation, combined with another prolonged period of messiness, saw a steady decline in the party's vote.

The poor election result weakened Turnbull's authority and emboldened Abbott, who was being aided and abetted by the foxes and the vixens — the collection of presenters and panellists, including his former chief of staff, Peta Credlin — who came out, usually after dark on Sky News, to fawn over and protect him while they scratched and bit at Turnbull.

By mid-2017, the clock was ticking, and he was halfway there. Everyone, friend and foe alike, was counting the number of polls he had lost. If the government fails to get in front, and the clock does not reset, and if Newspoll continues to be published every fortnight in *The Australian* (it sometimes skip weeks, particularly if public holidays intervene), the count could reach the mid-20s by the final sitting week of 2017, and the countdown will resume in 2018 with a ticking and a tempo too loud to ignore. Even if the clock does reset, the count will begin again when the Turnbull government falls behind again, which it will.

The government's ultra-slim majority, combined with the poll slide, has spurred predictable mutterings about another leadership change. I have described these conversations previously as political parlour games. They are the equivalent of ice for political junkies. They can be as deadly.

Right now, there is simply no alternative to Turnbull, and any attempt to remove him would guarantee defeat. Apart from the fact there is no stomach for another bloody coup, there is also, inside the government — despite signs of despair fed by the bad polls and distaste for policy shifts leftwards — an acceptance that, in the short to medium term, he remains their best option. Despite everything, the people who matter most remain gingerly optimistic that by sticking with him as Prime Minister they can still win the next election. The greatest danger they see to that is Abbott's increasingly brazen, relentless destabilisation.



If the Prime Minister fell under a bus, Peter Dutton would run hard for the leadership.

Of course, there is always the potential for disaster of a different kind. Another high-profile senior member of the government could become embroiled in a scandal involving entitlements and extracurricular activity, plunging the whole show into crisis. There is no stopping politicians or people in power from committing mad, bad or self-destructive acts. They think they have earned a magic immunity pin that protects them from stupid behaviour undertaken at taxpayer expense. They forget how quickly everything can turn to

rubble. All it takes is for the opposition or a smart journo to match up the travel claims of prime suspects, and voila. Say goodbye to career, to family, even to the government.

Or Queensland LNP backbencher George Christensen could defect on a matter of principle and rob the government of its one-seat majority in the house. These scenarios keep the Turnbull political managers awake at night.

Everything conspired during the winter recess to ensure that the leadership parlour games continued. For his part, Turnbull has made it well known that if a move against him succeeded, he would quit parliament immediately, triggering a by-election and threatening the government's one-seat majority. Blood and chaos in equal measure would engulf the Liberal Party. Apart from Turnbull, the two people who understand this best are Mathias Cormann and Peter Dutton.

Cormann and Dutton have emerged as the new leaders of the right. They had remained loyal to Abbott until the end, but those days are long gone. They are now integral to Turnbull's survival. Cormann, who slogged his guts out day and night for Abbott, whose discipline and commitment to staying on message is legendary, was so outraged by Abbott's persistent undermining that he publicly, spectacularly, let loose one Friday morning in February, castigating his former leader, only to cop abusive phone calls from him for it. If Turnbull goes, then in all likelihood so will Cormann. With a young family, a gruelling work schedule and the tyranny of travel to and from the west, Cormann will embark on another, less harmful, way of life. He will play no part in the tearing down of a leader. Nor does he plan, at this stage anyway, to stick around later to try to pick up the pieces, particularly as he would probably be back in opposition.

Dutton is in a different place. He is being groomed and is grooming himself as a future leader. With an even temperament and a good sense of humour rarely displayed, he has been more circumspect in what he has said about Abbott's behaviour — although, after Abbott's criticism of (ASIO chief Duncan) Lewis, Dutton pointedly said that if anyone had problems with refugee policy, they should address them to him as the responsible minister.

Abbott steers well clear of any criticism of Dutton but, mysteriously, there has been some fanciful talk that if Turnbull self-destructs, it would be best for the party to resurrect Abbott rather than burn another future leader by elevating Dutton. Miranda Devine didn't call them delcons (delusional conservatives) for nothing.



Christian Porter is slowly building his profile, particularly in welfare reform.

Dutton does have a marginal seat, and has to hang on to it to fulfil any leadership ambitions. Then again, if he loses his seat, the Coalition will probably lose the election, too. The same goes for another potential leader, West Australian Christian Porter, happy to be known as a modcon (modern conservative), who began quietly and is now slowly and impressively building his profile, particularly in welfare reform and by higher-energy performances in parliament.

There has been other equally fanciful talk that Turnbull should, at the appropriate time, acknowledge that he is never going to win the next election and stand down to make way, perhaps for Julie Bishop. That is not going to happen. Turnbull means it when he says he loves the job, and that while he may not be the best prime minister Australia has had, he is the happiest. Abbott's attempts to make his life miserable are definitely not succeeding.

Turnbull remains confident he can win the next election. At 62, he feels fit enough to continue in the job, insists he will remain prime minister for a very long time, will win the next election, and will then look at the one after. He certainly has no intention of giving it away any time soon, or allowing Abbott to try to rip it off him.

Despite his private ruminations, expressed to friends over a few wines, that he could stage a comeback with the help of friends inside the parliamentary party, Abbott will never again lead the Liberals, and any delusion he may have that if Turnbull fell under a bus tomorrow the party may turn to him is just that: delusional.

For his part, Dutton will not stand aside to allow someone else to take the leadership. Not Abbott and certainly not Bishop. Dutton made it clear from the beginning that the minute he felt betrayed or let down by Turnbull, or lost faith in him, everyone would know about it because he would immediately quit the frontbench. Whatever reservations he, like many other right-wing Liberals, harboured about the incursions of the 2017 budget into Labor

heartland, they were not deep enough to lead him to deliver what would have been a mortal blow to Turnbull, or to conclude, despite the disappointing stubbornness of the polls, anything other than that the government's best hope for winning the next election lay in Turnbull succeeding. So Dutton is doing whatever he can to ensure this happens. Turnbull's residual popularity provides the foundation for the government rebuilding, based on the three pillars of economic, energy and national security. Dutton is integral to the latter.

Dutton placates and cultivates the right. He is tough on matters of national security, he has run immigration and border-protection policies fiercely and effectively, and he is conservative on social issues — all of which appeal to “the base”. The conservative base, that is. It is another pillar designed to secure the government's future and Dutton's own.

But if the unthinkable happened and Turnbull fell under a bus, Dutton would not do what other aspirants — plagued by self-doubt, or anxiety that the numbers might not be there, or thoughts that waiting might bring more ideal circumstances — have done. He would not shy away or hold back. He would run, and run hard. Potentially, Dutton's main rival could be Scott Morrison, although, depending on timing and availability, Porter should not be discounted. Morrison had a rocky start as treasurer, as did Paul Keating, as did Peter Costello, which people tend to forget.

He handled his second budget much better than his first, and his performances improved. It helped quieten his critics, some of whom, including Abbott, could not forgive his refusal to rally his numbers for Abbott on the night of the challenge, while spurning Abbott's offer to run as his treasurer. Many relationships were shattered beyond repair that night in September 2015 when Abbott was overthrown. Morrison and Abbott did not speak for a long time. Then, on the night of the gala dinner on May 22 to mark the 75th anniversary of Robert Menzies' “Forgotten People” speech, they found themselves sitting at the same table. Talk about awkward. The two exchanged pleasantries; Morrison congratulated Abbott on a recently received honorary doctorate, and Abbott responded accordingly. They will never be mates, but at least, given the public nature of the occasion, their first post-breakup conversation was civil.



Julie Bishop is widely admired but unlikely to have the numbers for the leadership.

Bishop is widely admired, and handles her foreign affairs portfolio with great aplomb, but it is unlikely she would secure enough votes in the partyroom — even assuming she was interested in running for the leadership, which is highly questionable.

Her moment came the night before the spill motion against Abbott in February 2015 was moved by West Australian backbenchers Luke Simpkins and Don Randall. She could not convince herself to seize it. She and Turnbull, together in the same room — coincidentally at a fundraiser for Turnbull in Sydney — with Morrison on the phone, went through the permutations of which one of them could run, and where the others would fit. After much toing and froing, Bishop decided she couldn't, Turnbull decided he wouldn't, and there was little point in Morrison putting his hand up because he didn't have anywhere near enough numbers. The empty chair secured 39 votes.

There remains deep resentment about Bishop's perceived role in Abbott's eventual downfall, particularly in the party's right wing. Even if she ran and won a ballot now, there are doubts she would be able to handle the scrutiny that comes with leadership. Gillard was never asked a single tough technical question by the media during her time as prime minister, on tax or superannuation. Bishop has been flummoxed twice, once as shadow treasurer on tax, then again during the election campaign on superannuation. Journalists who find it easy to go easy on Labor politicians would quickly rack up a list of gotcha questions for someone who has spent eight years immersed in foreign policy. Her friends say this is Bishop's last job in politics. Luckily, it happens to be her dream fulfilled. And with some distinction. If she lost the deputy leadership, she would leave, and if the Coalition lost the election, she would also leave, because ipso facto she would lose the deputy leadership.

This is an edited extract from a new chapter in *The Road to Ruin: How Tony Abbott and Peta Credlin Destroyed Their Own Government* by Niki Savva, which is being re-released this weekend (Scribe, \$24.99). *The Road to Ruin* was named general nonfiction book of the year

for 2017 at the Australian Book Industry Awards in May. So far it has sold 40,000 print copies and 15,000 e-books.