

Turnbull at a turning point, but unlike Rudd, can survive as PM



Malcolm Turnbull flanked by Ixom boss Dean Draper, left, and Josh Frydenberg at the chemical and water plant.

Dennis Shanahan, *The Australian*, 12:00AM October 21, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull has a path out of the wilderness before him. It is strewn with obstacles and will be difficult to navigate, and there is no certainty of success.

But there is no rational reason to suggest that the Prime Minister can't survive as Liberal leader through to the Christmas break and into a new year, with an opportunity to regain lost political ground.

It is far too early to say a recovery or the foundation for a likely election victory is within his grasp, but the opposite view that he is doomed is more uncertain.

Again and again, Turnbull has been in a position to fire into clear air and lift his leadership, only to fail to launch.

In the past, the same has been said about recovery at similar stages in the electoral and leadership cycle of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, but all were unable to halt a downward spiral or fend off leadership rivals after a debilitating loss of support. Rudd's decline was sharper as internal dissension grew with his leadership style. Gillard's was painfully prolonged but inevitable after her broken carbon tax promise. And Abbott's loss of leadership began with the hardline 2014 budget.

All three prime ministers suffered as a result of internal undermining, catastrophic falls in public support and an inability to get out of the political holes they had dug for themselves.

Turnbull's trajectory to a place where he is unpopular with the public and leading a party cemented into a losing position in the polls is perhaps closest to Rudd's decline because they both started with such high expectations. That Turnbull has been a disappointment is clear; that he did not campaign well in the election last year is manifest; and that he is struggling to find clear air and sell a coherent political message is obvious.

Initial high voter satisfaction with Turnbull has turned to majority dissatisfaction, and his standing as preferred prime minister has plummeted since his popularity surged in 2015 on becoming Liberal leader.

The challenges Turnbull and the Coalition face are immediate and potentially fatal.

The states can kill off the latest attempt to end the climate wars before Turnbull even has a chance to put the pressure on Bill Shorten. The Coalition can lose its majority in the lower house if the High Court rules Barnaby Joyce ineligible to sit in parliament. And the same-sex marriage and freedom of religion legislation can create a boilover within the Coalition and a parliamentary showdown before Christmas.

Turnbull needs to enliven his team, sharpen his own political performance and work for economic improvement going into next year because when parliament resumes in February, Australia will be less than 12 months from an election being called. The duds have to go.

It is a self-serving and delusional claim that the election is two years away or even more than 18 months. The practical, not to mention the political, imperatives determine that the latest Turnbull can call an election is early 2019 and by then there will be a fully prepared Labor opposition and no element of surprise.

But the advantages Turnbull has over his three predecessors are that there is no active destabilisation of his leadership. His strongest ideological opponents in cabinet are his staunchest supporters; there is no clear contender; everyone

faces the same policy challenges; there is no competitive opposition leader; and there are economic green shoots.



Former prime minister Tony Abbott during Question Time.

Abbott's public policy pronouncements infuriate Turnbull, appeal to a conservative core of voters and cause confusion, but his interventions are not of the same calibre of those delivered by leadership aspirants against him, Rudd and Gillard.

The most immediate and most wide-ranging issue Turnbull has to address is the pressure on households and industry over rising electricity prices. The National Energy Guarantee emphasises affordable and reliable power instead of cutting greenhouse gas emissions. There is no Finkel review-inspired clean energy target, and an end to renewable energy subsidies from 2020 has given Turnbull and his Environment and Energy Minister, Josh Frydenberg, a credible start. It passed the Coalition partyroom this week with minimal complaints, - although there is still much detail to be sorted out. There is still the chance there could be an internal revolt or a crossing of the floor if MPs become convinced what looks to be a practical solution with "no more subsidies, no taxes, no emission trading schemes", as Turnbull and Frydenberg described it yesterday, could be a Trojan horse for a de facto carbon price or emissions trading scheme.

Yet at the outset, at least, the Coalition has finally settled on a scheme with a priority on cutting prices, not emissions, which gives Turnbull the opportunity,

finally, to exploit Labor's extravagant emissions reduction target, which threatens to put electricity prices up even further.

As he toured a chemical and water treatment plant at Laverton in southwest Melbourne yesterday, Turnbull concentrated on the practicalities. "All of the workers here depend upon affordable and reliable energy. That's what our plan will deliver," he said. "This is all about jobs, protecting Australian jobs, affordable, reliable energy and meeting our environmental commitments under the Paris Agreement." Turnbull recognises the states, particularly Jay Weatherill's South Australian Labor government, could kill off his scheme at the Council of Australian Governments before it gets anywhere near the federal parliament.

The Coalition's plan B in that case is to blame Labor for the failure of the scheme and to campaign through next year to the election, making cheaper electricity prices — even if it is the predicted mere \$115 a year by 2030 — the issue. Turnbull has been late coming to this argument but there is the framework of a plan.

The Coalition has been unwise to rely on the savings figure of \$115 off electricity bills because it is opaque and a long way off, and it is impossible to demonstrate delivery to everyone. Also, Turnbull has to stick to the script for once and not become distracted by Abbott or his own penchant for engineering and technology.

While the polls suggest the Yes campaign for same-sex marriage will be successful, a better result for Turnbull than a No victory, Labor has taken advantage of the looming internal Coalition dispute over religious freedoms by declaring support for Liberal Dean Smith's private member's bill, which provides only the bare minimum of protections. The closer the vote, the more justified and intense will be Liberal calls for the wider freedom protections espoused by John Howard and Abbott, which Turnbull conceded he would support.

The High Court's decision on Joyce's fate as an MP and a possible ensuing by-election in the NSW seat of New England is something about which Turnbull can do nothing. Of course, if there is a by-election in regional NSW where One Nation is ascendant, after the NSW Liberal government had disastrous by-election results last week, then Turnbull has to start thinking more about appealing to conservative regional voters than inner-city youth.

All of these issues can turn ugly for Turnbull, and the states or his partyroom could sabotage his energy plans or he could fail to sell the anti-Labor message. If the same-sex marriage vote is closer than expected, Turnbull against will have to turn to reassuring conservative Coalition voters, and the government could lose its one-seat majority in the house for a range of reasons.

Yet there is a path forward for Turnbull. It will require hard, uncomfortable work, but his fate is far from sealed and, unlike Rudd, Gillard and Abbott in the same situation, still largely in his hands.