

INQUIRER

## Turnbull has lost his way but Coalition has a fallback in Tony Abbott



Tony Abbott is 'not popular but he has legitimacy and known campaigning skills'. Picture: AAP

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It is more than a prime ministerial meltdown, parliamentary showdown, internal breakdown and constitutional shakedown. We seem to be suffering the sum of all our mistakes. Christmas always looked a long way off for Malcolm Turnbull and now the nation must long for a festive season reboot in the hope of more order and purpose in the new year.

Politics, as a rule, is never as good or as bad as it seems but coming months could bring a series of by-elections, a change in prime minister, a minority government, a general election or all of the above. Prospects for good governance seem remote. Even the tortuous path to same-sex marriage is more perilous as opponents seek to exploit the disarray. It is 10 years this month since Australia voluntarily, but not knowingly, departed from good government. Kevin Rudd promised continuity of economic conservatism and sober administration, tempting voters to punt on change without consequence.

It triggered a dismal decade; major parties betrayed constituents and values while institutions, minor parties and media all contributed to the parlous situation.

We approach the end of 2017 seemingly ungoverned and almost ungovernable. The Prime Minister is paralysed by indecision and surrounded by obstacles. The parliament is fragmented and intransigent. Labor is obstructive and ascendant. The media is Balkanised and superficial. Universities, bureaucracies and public broadcasters are activist and misleading.

Thankfully, the asinine national debate does not hobble the country; while the disarray undermines confidence and delays progress our economy, services and civil society function largely unhindered. Still, left unaddressed, this malaise will hurt us all. Imagine another decade such as this.

A reckoning has long been inevitable. We expected a fiscal recalibration managed sensibly by government or something more dramatic imposed by economic calamity. Perhaps we hadn't considered another option: political dysfunction conspiring to take us deeper into the self-harm of denial, more spending, deeper debt, increased taxes, higher energy prices and less reform. Strap yourselves in because that is what Bill Shorten is promising.

If the Opposition Leader's economic prescription isn't worrying enough, look at his political strategy: blocking, destroying or undermining virtually everything an elected government attempts. Mandate is not in his lexicon. (Critics often argue this was Tony Abbott's approach in opposition but all the Coalition was able to block, with the Greens, was Rudd's emissions trading scheme and Julia Gillard's so-called Malaysia solution).

On Wednesday, Turnbull had a 90-minute meeting with Shorten to discuss the eligibility crisis threatening the legitimacy of the parliament and the survival of the government, yet they emerged with no consensus, no solution and with the Opposition Leader holding the upper hand. Shorten extended the Prime Minister's purgatory, forcing Turnbull to stew without a clear way out. In actions rather than words it was a partisan play reminiscent of Paul Keating's famous taunt to John Hewson: "Mate, I want to do you slowly."

That an opposition leader can lord it over a prime minister like this says it all — especially when Shorten's own duplicity is obvious as he stands by four of his own MPs whose eligibility is dubious. The citizenship imbroglio is not one of Turnbull's making but he has handled it badly. It was clear at least three months ago that decisive action was required but he stalled and hoped. He was too optimistic and emphatic about what the High Court would find, too slow to

examine forensically the status of his own MPs and too reluctant to force an audit of some kind.

His hand was eventually forced not just by Labor but by conservative Liberal MPs loyal to Abbott and then, tellingly, by the former prime minister himself, just hours before Turnbull relented. The Prime Minister increasingly is captive to events rather than shaping them. Weighed down by his own Newspoll ballast, Turnbull's inability to create a sense of purpose or define a narrative means he has hit this unforeseen citizenship crisis without the momentum and authority to carry him through. He seems stuck, with survival the only imperative.

He has started to crack under the glare. His shrill invocation of the Holocaust to defend Josh Frydenberg's citizenship status was over the top. Turnbull also snapped back at provocations on breakfast television. His self-assessment that he was a "good man in a crisis" was redolent of Margaret Thatcher's line that being powerful is like being a lady: if you have to tell people you are then you aren't.

The figurehead of the Liberal "moderate" faction, Turnbull faces a toxic media environment that he has never mastered. As a foil to Abbott he was always lured by the flattery of progressive media such as the ABC and Fairfax Media. Now, as Prime Minister, he sees how these journalists will barrack for Liberals against conservative colleagues but not against the Labor-Greens alliance. When the going gets tough, his media allies see him only as a wounded Tory.

Yet he gets pain from the other side, too. Much of the mainstream media, from Sydney radio station 2GB's Alan Jones and Ray Hadley to Sky News hosts Andrew Bolt and Paul Murray — along with a raft of newspaper columnists — have been antipathetic to Turnbull since the day he felled Abbott. Rather than attempting to engage with these critics and their audiences, Turnbull has avoided them and deepened the enmity.

So instead of communicating with the Liberal base he seeks clear air on breakfast TV, FM radio and the Ten Network's The Project, talking to people who may be likelier to seek a selfie with Turnbull than vote for him.

For all its political failings and electoral self-harm, the Coalition has been far better for the nation than the disastrous six years under Labor. Rudd and Gillard wrecked the budget with panicked and wasteful spending, cemented permanent expenditure growth such as the Gonski education funding and

National Disability Insurance Scheme, started ill-conceived and unsustainable boondoggles such as the National Broadband Network, and jumped headlong into reckless carbon pricing and renewable energy targets. Under Abbott and Turnbull the Coalition has stanchied the damage.

Abbott axed the mining and carbon taxes and stopped the boats, but his first budget broke promises, set up inevitable roadblocks and created the climate for Turnbull to pounce. Turnbull's budget approach has been more about the possible, dodging serious repair but lowering Labor's trajectory of expenditure growth, starting to reduce taxes and beginning to tackle the energy mess. The disharmony, dishevelment and ineptitude of the Abbott and Turnbull governments has made them seem worse than the sum of their achievements. Just as Democrats must concede Donald Trump's rise is an indictment of Barack Obama's presidency, the prospect of a Shorten prime ministership is surely the most damning demonstration of squandered Coalition opportunities.

With just two sitting weeks left this year, Turnbull needs a process to deal with the citizenship crisis without robbing him of his majority. As this column foreshadowed four weeks ago, he is preoccupied with surviving until Christmas. Along the way he will also want to make history by delivering gay marriage. This would give him a small temporary boost and, in the midst of contemporary trauma, perhaps provide the enduring high point of his prime ministership. Labor's demands to fast-track and strengthen Turnbull's citizenship tests are difficult for the Prime Minister to refuse and challenging to implement. More cases will be flushed out. Shorten was taunted by Turnbull into revealing his own British citizenship renunciation papers in September. Now he is glowing in schadenfreude.

While ever a government is alive there is Micawber's hope that something will show up. But the forecast looks torrid for the Coalition. Some of the wisest heads in parliament and punditry point out that the modern habit of leadership switching is fatal. To dump another prime minister, like another swipe on political Tinder, runs the risk of confirming the shallowness of the enterprise.

But there is a large counterpoint to this assessment and that is that the person who created this scenario was Turnbull. The Coalition should have learned all the lessons about stability, weathering difficult times and avoiding leadership convulsions. But Turnbull took them down this path in 2015, inviting intense

pressure to perform and a hellish denouement for failure. Voters know this. It is why the Coalition has lost standing in the polls, not to Labor but to break-aways on the right.

This is why one leadership alternative will always remain for the Coalition: not another unexplained contortion but a reversion. Yes, just like Rudd. Not in the midst of this citizenship crisis, to be sure, but a return to Abbott cannot be ruled out because it would reinstall someone elected in a landslide in 2013 and robbed of a chance at re-election. Marginal MPs know Abbott would fight Shorten on core issues dividing the major parties. He is not popular but he has legitimacy and known campaigning skills. As has been the case since 2009, Turnbull and Abbott remain the only Coalition options this side of an election.

Due to his policies and his cynical approach, we cannot expect a Shorten government to correct the national bearing. Without major adjustment he would most likely ensure this lost period of the post-Howard decade is extended. We need to confront the sobering reality that it might only be the next generation of leadership, on either side of the aisle, that holds our best hopes.