

Turnbull should dismount — he has no horsepower



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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In recent years, political massacres keep happening. They are accompanied by massive swings against governments and the loss of a staggering number of seats. NSW Labor had been in power for 16 years when it was unceremoniously dumped by the voters. Swings of 18 per cent in safe seats were common.

Kristina Keneally was the last woman standing after her immediate predecessors had left her with a poisoned chalice. The defeat was so devastating that there was no guarantee that Labor could be back in two terms although new Opposition Leader Luke Foley seems to have put Labor back in the race. When shooting the leader becomes habit-forming, the price of disunity can be very high indeed.

We have just witnessed a statewide swing of 16 per cent against the Liberal government of Colin Barnett in Western Australia. Such carnage has few precedents in our electoral history. Again, party disunity was a big contributor. When a premier such as Barnett becomes incredibly unpopular, it is a wonder their party allows them to survive only to lead them to the massive loss they all knew was coming.

Mind you, his deputy and treasurer a couple of years back managed to have an affair with a Greens MP, sniff the seat on which a woman had been sitting and drive while drunk. I may be bold enough to suggest that Barnett might have been wise to have dispensed with this bloke much earlier than he did. A failed leadership bid by a total nonentity didn't help either.

If those two examples aren't enough for you, then we need to look at the last two elections in Queensland. Campbell Newman became the leader of the Liberal National Party even though he did not have a seat in the parliament. The Bligh government had run up enormous debts and committed the sin of breaking solemn promises made during the election campaign. Personal attacks against Newman and some of his relatives backfired spectacularly. As the election approached, we all knew that Labor's goose was cooked, but few realised how bad it was going to be. When you come back with seven or eight seats in a parliament of 89, history was unlikely to ever record another swing of that size. That Annastacia Palaszczuk could lead her party to victory just three years later was on no one's radar.

Again, leadership was at the heart of what eventuated. It was fine for Newman to call on Peter Costello to produce a report shining a spotlight on Labor's appalling record of spending. It was fine to talk up how tough you were going to be on debt and on budget repair. When you turn that rhetoric into a decision that causes 14,000 public servants to be sacked, you allow blind ideology to override common sense.

All the opposition had to do was point out how many nurses were being sacked at each hospital and Newman's huge majority started to look shaky. Queenslanders had to queue up at motor registries bereft of staff, and new infrastructure was scaled back to almost zero. One of the problems to be faced by the LNP at the election this year is that the treasurer who signed off on these savage cuts and had to proselytise on behalf of them is now the leader of the LNP.

Tim Nicholls is so identified with these horrors that he faces an uphill battle to get voters to believe he will not repeat them if re-elected. He may have other problems, though. On Monday night, I appeared on Paul Murray Live on Sky News. On the panel with me was the always outrageous Ross Cameron. This former federal Liberal MP has been kicked out of the party in NSW because he talked up the need for internal reform and refused to genuflect before an effigy of Michael Photios, the leader of the party's dominant left faction.

In discussion about the Queensland election he said he would not be able to pick out Nicholls in a police line-up.

If failure of leadership was a big factor in the electoral catastrophes I have outlined, then the performance of Malcolm Turnbull will be at the core of a - Coalition defeat. This week, when asked by a reporter if he was getting sick of the job given all the dramas engulfing him lately, his reply was that he was having fun.

To me that demonstrates his absolute lack of a good political nose. Would it not have been far better to say something like this: "I did not sign up for this job to have a good time. I signed up to make Australia a better place. Being the Prime Minister means hard tasks and tough decisions and I am determined to get on with the job. "There will be plenty of opportunity for the good times once the Australian economy is humming along, the price of electricity has come down and housing has become more affordable."

An answer like that would be universally applauded but it would never occur to our PM. His unerring capacity to pull the wrong rein is becoming the stuff of legend. On Wednesday night on Richo I interviewed Finance Minister Mathias Cormann. He said all was not lost for the next election because it was 18 months away. Similar sentiments have emanated from Acting Prime Minister Julie Bishop.

The problem with this analysis is that voters no longer listen to Turnbull. After the past week, they will hardly be encouraged to start.

Bill Shorten must be thanking his lucky stars. The opposition is no part of the present Australian narrative. When voters sit around the dinner table or the barbecue on the weekends, they are not discussing the shortcomings of Labor's energy policy or wondering how much tax they may pay under a Shorten government.

Labor is getting off scot-free because of the utter failure of Turnbull's leadership. Turnbull is becoming more and more isolated and I think I know why. Our PM has one thing in common with Gough Whitlam. He only ever wants to talk to people who are as intelligent as he is. But he never meets anyone in that category, so he talks to no one.