

## **PM's hold on job no longer guaranteed**

Simon Benson, The Australian, 12:00AM November 3, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull's hold on the leadership can no longer be assured. It was always a prime ministership built on pillars of sand. But if the talk that has been circulating over the past two weeks is to be believed, those sands are starting to shift beneath his feet.

The opinion of a growing number of MPs is that the government is paralysed by an erosion of leadership and has become chronically hostage to events.

Turnbull flew back into the country overnight from Israel as the citizenship crisis threatened to deepen. He will be overseas again from next week for the tail end of the summit season, forcing him to manage any further crisis by remote control. Unless he can cauterise these issues the government faces a death by a thousand cuts.

The political damage to the Turnbull government until now has been largely external, as reflected by polls that refuse to budge and a primary vote that at 35 per cent is historically and disastrously low. But this damage is also grinding down confidence among those who matter inside the Liberal party room.

The danger for Turnbull is not the assumed conservative revolt but the collapse of support among his own people. This is not to say anything will happen. Breakouts of panic are not a sign of impending action.

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But the level of chatter is growing and what should be of concern to the Prime Minister is the level of it coming from unpredictable elements within the loose moderate grouping.

It has not gone unnoticed among colleagues that several of Turnbull's original sponsors inside the party room — notably James McGrath and Scott Ryan — have begun to crab-walk away from Turnbull. And the alleged factional antics of self-anointed leader of the moderates, Christopher Pyne, only feed into a perception that the moderates cannot be trusted.

Simmering tribal hostilities have become open warfare. Unity is broken. Any withdrawal of support from Turnbull's base obviously brings Julie Bishop into play which the conservative forces — whose only counter is the long floated notion of a Peter Dutton-Greg Hunt team — are now actively alive too. However, several senior conservatives have privately said they would rather go into opposition than serve under Bishop.

But the sense of resignation now leaching into the party room goes well beyond this. One discussion reportedly having taken place this week canvassed a Scott Morrison/Christian Porter ticket — in opposition.

Pessimism at this level is internally corrosive. One senior Liberal operative told The Australian this week that any threat to Turnbull, should there be one, would probably not become apparent until the new year. "You don't start down a road until you know where you are going," they said.

And no one in the party room has got as far as this. But there is no ignoring the fact that MPs from both sides of the factional divide are openly talking about a problem at the leadership level.

It has gone beyond mischief making from the Abbott camp.

The risk the government and Turnbull will be overtaken by events is no longer a hypothetical but a real possibility.