

Turnbull's fate: such troubles cost Gillard, Abbott their jobs



Malcolm Turnbull heads to the end of the year in much the same way Julia Gillard did during most of her time as PM: wounded by colleagues. Picture: Kym Smith

David Crowe, *The Australian*, 12:00AM December 1, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull would be lucky to survive another week as Prime Minister if he were to be judged by the standards applied to his predecessors just a few years ago. He is in more trouble than Kevin Rudd in early 2010 and facing just as much danger as Julia Gillard in 2013 and Tony Abbott in 2015.

This is a brutal truth for a government that parades its failures with policy backflips, cabinet leaks and backbench revolts.

Turnbull is heading to the end of this year in much the same way that Gillard did during most of her time as prime minister: wounded by her colleagues, suffering from her own mistakes and hoping desperately to start afresh in the new year. It did not work for Gillard and will not work for Turnbull.

The idea of struggling through to Christmas and pressing the reset button in February is not a strategy, just a grim hope that Bill Shorten will be struck by lightning.

It is humiliating for Turnbull to end the year by announcing a royal commission he did not want. Worse, he waits for the banks to agree to it first and calls it

“regrettable” when he sets it up. The problem is that he has no easy way to stage a backflip when a handful of Nationals are hellbent on a fight and there is disunity all around.

Is the Prime Minister’s time up? It is a natural question after the past decade of Australian politics. The answer is that Turnbull is not holding on through personal popularity. The arguments against a coup are coldly rational. “The transaction costs of leadership change, we’ve proven, are just diabolical,” says one Liberal who has no illusions about the Prime Minister’s failings. There is no confidence that a replacement could do better. Julie Bishop is a clear alternative but is opposed by the conservatives. Peter Dutton can count on the conservatives but has no wider popularity in the electorate. Scott Morrison continues to suffer from the distrust of conservatives without having much support from the moderates.

This does not give Turnbull any security. The most it gives him is time.

Some of the Nationals are sniping at Turnbull in the hope they can weaken him today and help their preferred candidate tomorrow. Conservative Queenslanders such as George Christensen would clearly prefer Dutton. The Nationals have been agitating so vigorously, they look like trying to engineer the leadership of the Liberals. It is 50 years to the month since their hero, “Black Jack” McEwen, did exactly that.

But this is for the Liberals to decide. There is no incentive for a leadership rival to emerge when the Bennelong by-election is due on December 16, another batch of MPs is heading to the High Court to decide their citizenship and a “super Saturday” by-election is likely in March or April.

The government is very close to losing Bennelong. Liberal Party polling is said to show Kristina Keneally is neck-and-neck with John Alexander. Labor is outgunning the government on the ground. The combined power of Labor, the Greens, the unions and GetUp! seems likely to deliver the seat to the opposition.

The Coalition must face the real prospect of minority government before it is off to a “mini-election” in the new year. On its present performance, it could struggle to hold power on the floor of the House of Representatives — a likelier scenario for a change of government than an early general election.

Only a substantial shift will change the government's fortunes. This does not mean a dramatic grab for attention — a “real Julia” moment that is guaranteed to fail — but a sharper approach to politics.

The verdict from 2017 is one of chronic political failure. The Coalition has slugged the banks with a \$6.2 billion levy, committed another \$22bn to schools, delivered its election pledge on same-sex marriage and promised to cut power bills after finally developing the national energy guarantee. The dividend is a long slump in the polls.

This shatters the complacent belief that steady work on good policy would bring its own reward.

The options for significant change include returning Abbott to cabinet. Ministers do not dismiss the idea, even though it seems almost impossible for Turnbull to accept. What other way is there to settle the Coalition's civil war? Only a unified government can have any hope of winning new fights with Labor.

The coming cabinet reshuffle is an opportunity for change but is much less important than insiders suggest. None of Gillard's reshuffles changed the fate of her government. The reshuffle needs to promote younger and hungrier ministers who have proved they can manage a portfolio, win over the community and put Labor under pressure. How many candidates meet that test?

Consider another challenge. It will not be long before Turnbull leads a government that has lost 30 Newspolls in a row. The date will probably arrive in April. Will the Prime Minister express regret at setting this benchmark for leadership? He cannot reach this moment without offering a clear sense of direction and an apology of some kind — an admission that he and the government must do better.

It is not as if the government has nothing to offer. Turnbull has reminded voters in recent weeks that Australia is adding about 1000 jobs a day. Interest rates are low, economic growth is reasonable and the Coalition pledges smaller government against Labor's plan for tax hikes. This is a platform that usually keeps Liberals in power.

The cabinet decision to launch a royal commission into banks captures the government's shocking dilemma in a single moment. It admits defeat against

more than a year of sharp politics from the Opposition Leader. It concedes the power of a handful of Nationals to beat the leadership (not just Turnbull) into submission. It responds to the Coalition's failure to hold a majority in parliament, which is in turn the result of a weak performance at last year's election.

Once again, the collective failures of the entire Coalition leave Turnbull paying the biggest price.

One day, when Coalition MPs are in opposition, they will have time to consider whether some of these fights were worth having. They will have lost the thing that makes them look important now: the ability to cause unrest in a government partyroom. They will sit in parliament, largely ignored, with little to do and few staff to do it for them.