

Turnbull scores a 'D' for delusion, desertion and dead cats

Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 12:00AM December 6, 2017

The band is back together, as Malcolm Turnbull announced on Saturday, welcoming Barnaby Joyce back into the government fold. It's the right time then to reflect on the year behind us and report on how the band leader has performed. Next week, reporting season will extend to other band members.

As the Prime Minister, Turnbull is right to feel upbeat after Saturday's by-election win. When you're sinking and a piece of wood floats by, grab it even if it's porous. Though a by-election record win is nothing to be sniffed at, if Turnbull's name had been on the New England ballot paper, the result was likely to have been very different.

His capacity for delusion is just one of the reasons he earns a D this year for his 2017 performance as Prime Minister. Not a fail, mind you, because he's still hanging on by the skin of his teeth. When Turnbull was asked on Sky News's Sunday Agenda program whether he needed to find a way to connect with the Liberal Party's conservative base, he dodged the question and pointed to the by-election win.

It's delusional because the reality of the New England by-election doesn't reflect Turnbull's self-aggrandising interpretation. It was a win for the Nationals leader, a popular politician with more authenticity than half the cabinet combined, who wasn't up against a genuine opponent, no Tony Windsor, no One Nation candidate. And it was a clear signal from voters that they don't care much for dual-citizenship traps set by section 44 of the Constitution.

The kind of man who can't help but crow, the PM claimed Barnaby's win as his own. Turnbull has spoken in private recently claiming that he's not losing votes from the Liberal base. This delusion reaches comic proportions given the growing number of voters who have decamped from the Liberal Party to One Nation, and increasing numbers looking closely at Cory Bernardi's breakaway conservative party. Despite a little poll boost this week, the Turnbull government has trailed Labor all year, for 24 polls now. Its best result was a lag of four points. This week it was a six-point lag behind Labor.

Reviewing the year that's been, the gap reflects Turnbull's D and his desertion of the Liberal brand. After much vacillation last year, he dabbled on reforming

18C at the beginning of 2017, but it was a political performance, not a hard sell based on liberal-minded convictions. The result in March — minor process changes — reflected Turnbull's transactional politics, where he can say he tried, but other left-leaning Liberals defeated him. These LINOs — Liberals in Name Only — as one Twitter pundit labelled them last week, talk just a little about free speech, or religious freedoms, but do even less to defend these core liberal principles.

Again in March, Turnbull appointed as ABC chairman a bloke who doesn't think the place has a bias problem despite knowing that the ABC is a serial offender against its charter. It was do-nothing decision-making from Turnbull.

Turnbull knew Gillian Triggs was a disaster as Australian Human Rights Commissioner. He knew her to be, let's just say, tricky in her dealings with him and the Senate estimates committee. He must have known the AHRC is a body crying out for a budget cut, but again he chose the do-nothing path.

The Prime Minister's D is also for his refusal to enter the cultural arena, let alone dominating it as Bob Menzies and John Howard did as prime ministers. While Turnbull thinks he's the smartest kid in the class, few were fooled by word games he played in a July speech in London when he claimed to be governing in the Menzian way with a "progressive" bent. Menzies didn't use the word in its modern reincarnation to mean soft-left because the word didn't have that meaning in 1944. These days Turnbull's only cheer squad are LINOs.

Indeed, when questions of defending Australian culture emerge, Turnbull rarely leads. In late August, when a brouhaha broke out about changing inscriptions on statues that date back to the colonial era, Howard denounced it, and then Turnbull followed — the next day.

Throughout the year, Turnbull said nothing much at all when same-sex marriage activists routinely shouted down people with different views as bigots. In September, with the plebiscite under way, the Prime Minister declared he believed in religious freedom "even more strongly" than in same-sex marriage. Alas, it wasn't a front-foot defence, it was a backfooted response to Howard's call for the government to outline protections for religious freedoms before the postal vote was over.

Again there was that sinking feeling that Turnbull's declaration was about politics, not convictions. If Turnbull can convince parliament this week to beef

up guarantees of religious freedoms in the same-sex marriage bill, kudos to him. Alternatively, it will go the same way as 18C — a half-hearted attempt by a Prime Minister not upset that LINO's got their way.

Turnbull's abandonment of the Liberal base has become a well-established pattern throughout his second calendar year as Prime Minister. When the plebiscite vote came down as Yes last month, Turnbull basked in the glory and said nothing to more than four million Australians who voted No, many within his own party.

Turnbull's D is a reflection of his policies that bounce like a dead cat. Darting from one policy to the next, there is no story for voters to follow. Last Tuesday a banking royal commission was the worst idea in the world. On Thursday the Prime Minister announces a banking royal commission to a fracturing Coalition and to defuse Labor's successful retail campaign against the banks.

Last week, Turnbull said we attack banks at our peril, yet his government slapped them with a bank tax to plug a budget black hole.

This year will also be remembered for his dearth of political judgment throughout the citizenship crisis, immediately attacking the Greens for their "incredible sloppiness" only to find plenty of sloppiness in his own government and then insisting for weeks that an audit wasn't necessary.

Claiming that an audit was an insult to the rule of law was a desperate man saying desperate things, only to then agree to a quasi-audit after months of equivocation, chewing up political capital he didn't have.

Turnbull needs to stop watching the 2008 movie *How to Lose Friends & Alienate People*. Under him, the Liberal parliamentary party has fractured not just between progressives and conservatives, but division is rampant within each of the strands. Then add the fractious relationship between the two Coalition parties, the Liberals and the Nationals. Renegade backbenchers and leaks from cabinet point to his poor political management.

Though there are some runs on the board, Turnbull ends the year with voters still unclear about his achievements. Leigh Sales, during an interview with the Prime Minister on 7.30 earlier this year, asked: "How is it possible that in all of that time you've not yet managed to have a signature achievement?" Turnbull became cranky and rattled off a list of his chosen achievements. But the fact

that the question had to be asked points to a lost narrative of his government. Ask a punter what Howard did as PM, and the list is easy, from gun controls to a GST to balancing the budget and his cultural leadership.

Worst of all, Turnbull has reached the stage of frenzy, lashing out at others, instead of taking responsibility for his own poor performance. Turnbull can't seem to help himself, making it hard for others to help him. Were it not for his very Rudd-like glass jaw, the Prime Minister might learn how to improve on his D grade.

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