

OPINION

Put simply, Malcolm Turnbull is in the wrong party

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After the euphoria of Saturday night's big win for Barnaby Joyce comes today's Newspoll and, with it, once more, Malcolm Turnbull is back to a zombie prime ministership. To succeed, Turnbull needs big policy changes and big personnel changes that, temperamentally, he just can't deliver.

More fundamentally, he's doomed by his history. In a democracy, the top job is the gift of the people, not the politicians, and you can't seize the job from the people's choice and expect to overcome that dishonour.

Paul Keating just got away with politically assassinating Bob Hawke because Hawke was well past his prime and Keating could claim much credit for the achievements of the Hawke government.

A bit of leeway was given to Julia Gillard because she was our first female prime minister and because she'd given Kevin Rudd the numbers to become Labor leader in the first place.

But Turnbull was just a merchant banker with a sense of entitlement when he shafted Tony Abbott and every day since has confirmed that, for the present PM, it's all about him.

What is the point of the Turnbull government other than keeping Turnbull in and Bill Shorten out? This is an allegedly conservative government that's increased taxes, increased spending and increased regulation and is now guilty of what, in regard to last week's banking royal commission, John Howard described as "rank socialism".

Why would any right-of-centre voter support a government that's slugged self-funded retirees and bank shareholders with big new taxes, blown billions of borrowed dollars on the left's Gonski changes, put cutting emissions ahead of cutting power prices, and just agreed to a royal commission into the banks that it had resisted for two years?

Why would any left-of-centre voter support a Labor-lite government ahead of the real thing? And why would anyone support the worst ever Liberal government, on the grounds that the alternative would be our worst Labor government, when that would just reward failure rather than break this cycle of political cannibalism?

The past few weeks have entrenched a routine of bad polls, cabinet leaks, leadership speculation, and internal criticism verging on open defiance.

The only question is whether the Liberal partyroom gets in first and terminates the Turnbull prime ministership before he and they are smashed at the next election. Changing the leader doesn't guarantee victory but not changing will guarantee defeat.

Turnbull lacks the judgment, the temperament and the stamina to be an effective prime minister. He has deliberately alienated the Liberal Party's conservative heartland, rather than striven to embrace it. Under stress, he's far more likely to lash out than to learn from setbacks.

And as the lethargic last election campaign demonstrated, he still keeps merchant banker hours. His most fatal failing, though, is that he's in the wrong party. You can't lead a centre-right party when all your instincts are of the centre-left.

Some have likened Turnbull to Rudd as a narcissistic carpetbagger. There is something in this, which helps to explain why both have been widely loathed inside their own parties.

As LNP senator Ian Macdonald said last week, the government was doomed from the moment it replaced the leader who had led it to victory. The mood inside the government is now oscillating between despair and panic.

Most conversations between MPs, I'm told, start with an admission of impending disaster and proceed to the conclusion that it will now be almost impossible to avoid.

Julie Bishop, it's said, is too similar to Turnbull to regather the party's base. Peter Dutton, it's said, is too much the Queensland copper to lead the country. And Abbott, it's said, is too much damaged goods to come back even though he's a proven election winner. No one is quite sure what to do, but something

is almost certain to happen because MPs don't normally go quietly to their political deaths.

One early trigger for change could be losing the Bennelong by-election. Given the 5 per cent average by-election swing against incumbents, a 10 per cent swing would terrify at least a third of the party.

Turnbull failing his own leadership test in April next year by losing 30 consecutive Newspolls could equally trigger a challenge. A series of by-elections triggered by MPs falling foul of the citizenship rules could lead to a general election (which would also be the best way to ensure that dual citizens no longer sit in our parliament).

But it won't be enough for Liberals just to change their leader if they want a fighting chance of victory at the next election. You can't campaign effectively without policy differences worth fighting for.

Ending subsidies for new renewables and reviewing our Paris commitments would stop skyrocketing power prices. Cutting immigration would ease the upward pressure on housing prices and the downward pressure on wages.

Amending section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act would assert the importance of free speech. And avoiding all new government spending except on economic infrastructure and national security would eventually get debt and deficit under control. Government, after all, isn't mainly about the identity of the prime minister; it's about what any particular prime minister might do to make the country better.

As long as the Liberals are arguing about personalities and not policies, they're quite unfit to govern.

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