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## Barnaby Joyce takes final tumble over affair, joins Tony Abbott on backbench



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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It has all the hallmarks of the last days of Rome. Another conservative leader has been humiliated, this time the Nationals' Barnaby Joyce by his own hand. Former conservative prime minister Tony Abbott is in open warfare with former cabinet colleagues. Malcolm Turnbull is reduced to fending off tawdry controversies from Washington, DC. The Coalition is distracted, discombobulated and divided.

On his way out, Joyce lashed out at “leaking and backgrounding” that will “destroy” any government. He styled himself as a battler for the people living in “the weatherboard and iron” and fighting against the “economic and social stratification” of life.

The ideological paradoxes within this shambles are worthy of examination. A socially conservative Deputy Prime Minister sought amnesty for getting his former staff member pregnant while a progressive Prime Minister imposed a workplace sex ban and conservative ministers shut down an immigration debate started by their former leader.

Personal enmities, leadership trauma and frenetic poll-driven media coverage will be unleashed again, while the crucial policy issues that will dominate the next election hardly get a look-in.

Almost unnoticed in this week's three-ring circus was the act where South Australia's Labor Premier Jay Weatherill unveiled campaign mugs with pictures of himself pitted against federal Environment and Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg. Here is a premier taking aim at Canberra over energy policy, one of the most important and volatile issues of our time. This is a battle the Turnbull government can and should embrace; it could be its last best hope.

The conservative wing of the Liberal Party is itching to fight on this battleground of mainstream cost-of-living pressures and the need to unburden business and boost economic growth. However, past mistakes and failings are easier to identify than solutions; and the Liberal moderates, especially the Prime Minister, are hamstrung by climate gestures and commitments.

The government's troubles — personal, political and policy — are emanating from the conservative side of the Coalition. The most critical fracturing in the body politic is at the conservative end where the Liberals and Nationals are bleeding votes to One Nation and the Australian Conservatives.

While conservatives must shoulder their share of the blame for their woes — from their strategic decision to fight a same-sex marriage campaign they could never win to Abbott's failures in government and Joyce's personal/public overlap — the Coalition's crisis stems more from the triumphalism of the moderates and the marginalisation of conservatives. The 2016 election results and subsequent polls prove that conservative voters have walked away.

The latest worry for Turnbull must be that Joyce's self-harm and the government's reaction to Abbott's policy activism could exacerbate the problem.

The Deputy Prime Minister should, of course, have quietly exited the scene a fortnight ago and gone about reconstructing his private and political life out of cabinet and out of the public gaze. All he achieved by digging in was visiting more damage upon those he loves and the government he serves, dragging into the public arena an unspecified sexual harassment claim that he denies — oh, and prompting his Prime Minister to impose an imprudent office sex ban.

Also this week, the government's reaction to Abbott's immigration intervention was clumsy and overdone. You don't have to agree with Abbott's sledgehammer prescription to almost halve the annual intake to recognise the merit of discussing the issue. If high immigration numbers and poor integration

among some Muslim cohorts is a concern for voters — and minor parties are running on curbing Muslim immigration — then a Coalition government ought to ventilate the issues and explain, if not refine, its approach. Silencing debate is a tactic of the censorious left, not to be deployed by a Coalition government against its own. “We ought to be capable of having a sensible debate,” Abbott said, demanding his colleagues show him more respect. “Given some of the policies of this government, I’m happy to serve on the backbench.”

This debate has become incendiary in political terms but impotent in addressing voter concerns. For all his possible ulterior motives, Abbott highlighted a matter of demonstrable public concern. Shutting him down only invited more blowback and told some conservative voters the government was deaf to their concerns.

Many Liberal MPs seem to think the character of the nation changed when they switched leaders. It did not. When Abbott made mistakes and Liberals replaced him with Turnbull, the voters didn’t change. Moderates may want to present a kinder, gentler face, but they can’t alter the history of Abbott’s landslide win or the reasons people voted for the Coalition. The verdict on the softer version of the Liberals was delivered in 2016, all but wiping out the Coalition’s majority.



Tony Abbott’s remarks this week on halving the annual immigration intake highlighted a valid public concern. Picture: AAP

The Turnbull Liberals lack policy differentiation from Labor, reflecting the fatal flaw of the so-called Liberal moderates who tend to cede criticism from leftists in the media and opposing parties and shrink from tough debates. Be it border protection, climate policy, the Northern Territory intervention or tackling the

Australian Human Rights Commission, moderate MPs seldom show a stomach for the fight. They want to be loved.

On education funding, banking taxes and even climate action, the strategy has been to blunt Labor criticism and remove differences. This makes for smoother dealings with the Senate and comfortable interviews on the ABC but it tends to surrender the point of a Coalition government — usually elected to fix Labor messes with hard-headed decisions. Unless it carves out sharper divergence from Labor, the Coalition is on course to be swept away by Bill Shorten's superficial attacks, politics of envy and magic pudding economics.

It is easy to allow today's personality feuds to gloss over the ideological struggles — Barnaby defending his baby, Abbott seeking vengeance and Cory Bernardi spitting the dummy — but the soap operas originate from philosophical disagreements or are exacerbated by them. Turnbull, the moderate leader, lacked the internal authority to convince the conservative Nationals leader to step aside. Abbott styles himself as the conservative voice in the wilderness, fighting for the soul of the party and lighting the path to electoral salvation. Bernardi decided the party no longer had room for true conservatives and spotted a market opportunity.

When Joyce lets down social conservatives, Turnbull talks up his Paris targets and cabinet ministers dismiss immigration concerns, it is Pauline Hanson and Bernardi who rub their hands in glee. The Prime Minister and his supporters can pretend otherwise — perhaps convincing themselves they will steal the middle ground from Labor — but the hard evidence shows the Coalition has crab-walked away from its conservative flank, which has turned to right-wing break-aways. Unsurprisingly for a market economy, the mainstream is weighted to the right of centre; even Labor leaders are most successful when they pitch to the right.

For 1½ decades One Nation had become a historical footnote in Australian politics. It was reanimated when Abbott was brought down. This was not a coincidence. From day one Turnbull needed to demonstrate he was not steering the Coalition ship to port. Instead, he has been lured by the siren song of the leftist political/media class (perhaps this was most obvious the day after Donald Trump was elected, when Turnbull ratified the Paris climate deal).

Turnbull, with Scott Morrison, has a company tax plan that offers a plausible prescription to drive investment and growth, and a reasonably likely policy stoush with Labor. It is the sort of fiscal battle that can unite the moderate and conservative strands of the Coalition. However, Labor has backed tax cuts for small business and relishes the fight against the “big end” of town.

Turnbull's Washington trip, which wisely includes a powerful business delegation, will help to bolster his case on tax reform. It also could be used to turn the emphasis back on to energy, with industry leaders such as Visy's Anthony Pratt noting the significant advantage of lower power costs in the US.

While the government is struggling just to survive day to day, energy remains the crucial economic issue that offers hope. Australia has turned its back on its natural low-cost energy advantage by pursuing policies such as the carbon tax (since scrapped) and the renewable energy target while restricting gas exploration and exploitation. South Australia has led the charge on renewables with an arbitrary 50 per cent state target that has hastened the closure of two major coal-fired power stations and some gas generators, leading to the highest electricity prices in the nation and an over-reliance on interstate baseload power transmitted through an interconnector.

When the interconnector failed in 2016 — because of a surge when wind farms tripped and a regional power line was felled in a storm — SA had no baseload power and suffered its first statewide blackout, triggering chaos and costing the economy \$367 million. Subsequently the state Labor government unveiled a \$500m remedial plan including diesel generators, the world's largest battery and a publicly funded gas generator to underpin state supplies.

With federal Labor promising a national 50 per cent renewable target, SA is the testing ground of national energy policy. Next month's state election is a prequel of the federal energy contest and Weatherill dramatically escalated the stakes this week by doubling down on his renewables crusade, lifting his target to 75 per cent. Frydenberg quickly described this as "complete madness", saying it would exacerbate the state's price and reliability dilemmas. (Paradoxically, it is the RET and other federal schemes that fund SA Labor's renewables ambitions.)

Weatherill is gambling with the household budgets of voters, the cost base of businesses and the viability of the state economy. So far he is losing and Frydenberg has likened him to a problem gambler chasing his losses.

In 2015 Weatherill went to the Paris climate conference and boasted of the "big international experiment" his state was running on clean energy. On March 17 we will get the results directly from the laboratory rats — and it will tell us much about how the energy battle will play out in Canberra. If Weatherill is trounced, Shorten and Labor will not relish being accused of taking the same experiment to the nation.

The Turnbull government must somehow signal that energy affordability and reliability will trump Paris targets. At the moment it is trying to be all things to

all people — like Labor — and arguing its national energy guarantee will ensure emissions reductions occur with less disruption than under Shorten's plan. Exiting Paris would provide dramatic differentiation and start the right argument, but finding a way to foster investment in power generation is a much more intractable problem given business must plan for the likelihood of a carbon price under future Labor governments.

Besides, Turnbull could not walk away from Paris; he has invested too much through the years on climate gestures. As they have been for a decade, he and the Coalition are stuck in a cleft stick on climate and energy policy.

Yet this much is clear: the more they diverge from Labor's climate activism and renewable energy push and the more they support affordable and reliable electricity, the more support they will win from the mainstream and the fewer votes they will bleed to parties on the far right. They need to unleash conservative instincts for tough political battles or they will drift to oblivion. And their two best conservative advocates — Abbott and Joyce — will be on the backbench, in the bad books, wounded and brooding.