

Joyce, Turnbull take Coalition to the brink



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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The risks to the continued existence of the Coalition and the survival of the Turnbull government, as well as the personal rancour between the leaders of the Liberal Party and the Nationals, are unprecedented in their scope, cause and potential for damage.

What's more, never before has such bitter animosity between the leaders of the Liberal Party and the Nationals/Country Party been played out in public.

There is no doubt that Barnaby Joyce has driven the Coalition to this moment and is clearly at fault on every point, **but Malcolm Turnbull's interference in Nationals leadership issues and his evisceration of the Deputy Prime Minister on prime-time television have made things only worse.**

Crucially, the Prime Minister and Joyce had a conversation after Turnbull's press conference, which included strong commentary about Joyce's personal life and an incredible ban on sex between ministers and their staff.

There was no pre-conference discussion about what could be said, within reason, that would enable the Liberal leader to appear strong and decisive as he announced his captain's call to ban "sexual relations" in ministerial offices or

parade Joyce's tragic family shortcomings. There was only post-conference anger.

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Joyce is, like every man, the architect of his own fortune, but he has made a mess of it in a way that threatens, as he says, the most successful political relationship since World War II. Yet Turnbull has been, as Joyce points out, "inept".

Rather than get rid of Joyce with his call for him to consider his position and by imposing a new morality, Turnbull, who is no puritan and genuinely and deeply believes in fidelity in marriage, has only helped Joyce make an irrational and politically suicidal call for tribal loyalty among the Nationals, **which may succeed.**

Yesterday, Turnbull was toning down his rhetoric — and there was a sense that if he didn't succeed in getting rid of Joyce, now or within a week or a month, he would have to work with the man who has hung the label of "inept" around his neck.

To be fair, Turnbull has doomed Joyce in his conservative seat with his character assessment of the candidate who was swept back into parliament in New England's December by-election.

Since the 2016 federal election, the Liberal Party has not been able to govern in its own right, relying on a letter from the Nationals leader to remain in government. The Coalition government under Turnbull has a majority of one.

Joyce has emphasised the need for the Coalition to work together and succeed, even as he lashed out at the Prime Minister yesterday. The Deputy Prime Minister's rejection of Turnbull's "inept and unnecessary" intervention into the Nationals' leadership is the worst possible result for the government, the Coalition, Turnbull and Joyce.

Turnbull's decision to attempt to blast Joyce out of the Nationals leadership and his cabinet has backfired badly, with the Nationals leader scorning the criticisms and appealing to the strength of clan loyalty in the 85-year old country party.

Country MPs from all parties can't abide media executions; a sacked minister who read about his removal in the media famously declared that "in the bush we

shoot our own dogs”. The result is an unknowable effect on the waverers within the Nationals who will decide Joyce’s fate.

It is clear that as a result of the Joyce affair the Coalition has lost crucial political momentum in the first the two weeks of parliamentary sittings. **The government is back where it was in the doldrums at the beginning of the previous three years.**

Don’t worry about the travails of personal lives, no matter how poignant, personally devastating or dangerously balanced. It is the politics of the past two weeks that has left the government adrift.

The Coalition and Turnbull have no one but themselves to blame for their inability to take advantage of Labor’s huge woes. Like a vessel sailing into a season of dead calm, the good ship Coalition was anticipating an escape from the parched experience of the becalmed sailor. Instead, it has ended up with not a drop to drink and all the boards have shrunk.

Once again, a politically inept Coalition has handed an advantage to an opportunist Labor Party, which has had to do nothing more than exercise normal political sense.

Turnbull is now probably doomed to face 30 “losing Newspolls in a row” — the benchmark he set to remove Tony Abbott as leader — and must contend with the reality come April, probably when he is overseas and Joyce is due to become both acting prime minister and the father of his fifth child. Even if by some strike of lightning Turnbull should live out his over-optimistic dream and fluke a change at 29 Newspolls, it would mean nothing for a government on the brink.

The loss of 30 Newpoll surveys will play out as it will. It is largely in Turnbull’s hands how it is perceived, but **there are alarming signs the Prime Minister and his office are unaware of the difference between expectation and anticipation. There is no sign he has given up the hope he can break the 30-Newspoll hoodoo, so there is no attempt at massaging expectations.**

Benefiting from an improving economy and a benign summer break, Turnbull was on a high at the start of last week, while Bill Shorten was under pressure on so many fronts. Better Coalition discipline during the summer, record job creation last year and growing pressure on the Opposition Leader combined to give the Coalition the best start to the parliamentary year it has had in a long time.

Shorten finds the ineptitude of his opponents hard to believe — but he will suffer as well from the consequences of the damage all political parties face through association with **the “Canberra swamp”**. **A Dante-like vision of a circle of hell, so far removed from suburban Canberra that it is laughable, is now being used as code for the federal capital.**

This is the essence of the latest saga: when Joyce’s intersection of private and public life arrived in the public eye, including a baby due in April with a former staff member and the collapse of his life with his wife and four daughters, the government’s agenda was derailed.

Whatever the previous ethical rules for politicians and the media, the sensational pictures of Joyce’s pregnant partner, Vikki Campion, changed the equation to the extent that Turnbull changed his own position and the rules governing ministers by the end of the week.

The Prime Minister decreed, as a captain’s call after some consultation in the leadership group, that, as of about 5pm on Thursday, sex between ministers and their staff would be a breach of ministerial standards.

Last week, Joyce was OK. By the end of this week, he would have been in breach.

For Turnbull, this was an attempt to regain control of the agenda, demonstrate moral and political strength, and put pressure on Joyce to resign as Nationals leader and go to the backbench.

Yet only six days before the announcement, he suggested ministers were adults who were entitled to consensual, respectful sexual relations with staff. There is no doubt Turnbull is personally sincere, but implementing a ban on sexual relations in ministerial offices threatens to be a minefield. Bill Clinton was impeached over such matters but remained president of the US.

Although Turnbull raised the sex ban in the leadership group and consulted some of his colleagues, he made a captain’s call on the implementation because the code of conduct is in his name.

Treasurer Scott Morrison has strongly supported Turnbull’s “courageous” decision, while **many others have refused to endorse it or explicitly condemned it.**

Earlier in the week, **Turnbull had demonstrated a remarkable ability to distance himself not only from Joyce but also from his own office on the issue of whether a minister can employ his mistress but not his wife —**

something he now totally rejects — by declaring the argument had been made without his authorisation.

He also left his office and the soon to be acting prime minister — Mathias Cormann, incidentally the first Belgian-born Australian leader — **out to dry by refusing to deny he had spoken to at least one Nationals MP about the leadership of his Coalition partner.**

The Nationals are in turmoil and have been for a while. The affair with Campion is, some suggest, a “symptom of the dysfunction in Joyce’s office, not the cause”.

Meanwhile, leadership and deputy leadership tensions play themselves out, bringing to the surface ambitions and rivalries that have festered within the Nationals for months and years.

The Nationals this week sought to regain control of their destiny as various party elders urged Joyce to clear up his mess and party president Larry Anthony urged them all to “let the dust settle”. Joyce was given a last, slim chance but no permanent stay.

Turnbull’s seemingly moralistic and dangerously difficult to implement policy on sex in ministerial offices has only stoked the ire of the Nationals, who were preparing to make a final, fatal judgment on Joyce in their own time.

Party elders from both Coalition parties were deep in negotiations late yesterday in an attempt to rescue the conservative side of politics.

The past couple of weeks of bad news for the Coalition can substantially, but not entirely, be laid at Joyce’s door.

There is likely worse to come on all fronts — and in the meantime Shorten is laughing like a drain and banking another week in parliament.

For the record, any fall in the Prime Minister’s standing in Newspoll is likely to be matched by the Opposition Leader as a fellow creature from the black lagoon.