

Barnaby Joyce resignation was tragic, late, necessary and laced with danger



Barnaby Joyce's resignation will trigger new problems.

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Barnaby Joyce brought it upon himself. His resignation was essential, belated, tragic and will trigger new problems for the National Party and government.

The Barnaby debacle will leave a legacy of decay and distrust within the Turnbull government. While Malcolm Turnbull recognised Joyce had to resign — having declared effective “no confidence” in him a week ago — his government is still diminished.

The Nationals are divided and traumatised. They have no high-profile alternative leader to become deputy PM. The risk is more fraying of the conservative vote — the optics are lethal, with former leaders Tony Abbott and Joyce now in backbench exile.

Bad blood between the Nationals and Liberals is running far and wide.

The Joyce demise is a classic tragedy. While his resignation was an imperative, it still leaves a weakened government given his high profile as a populist, conservative and regional politician. There is no “fit for purpose” replacement, just a vacuum. The perception is a government deep into self-ruin.

The Joyce crisis has probably killed off Turnbull's recovery hopes. It is the nature of this serial train wreck that is so astounding — from Joyce's personal relationship, its inept management, the eruption of Turnbull-Joyce tensions to Joyce's blind denial of his political responsibility.

In the end, the pent-up political and media pressure, along with new unproven allegations, broke that defiance. With Michael McCormack tipped to become leader next week, the possible Nationals leadership team — McCormack and Bridget McKenzie — will be highly inexperienced, though not without potential.

The entire crisis exposes again the essential problem of the Turnbull government: disastrous political management. The government was a sitting duck in the fallout from the Joyce affair. Turnbull and Joyce were never frank enough with each other even to devise a strategy. The fiasco is extraordinary.

Joyce's failure to ring Turnbull in Washington DC to inform the PM of his resignation as deputy PM reveals their busted relationship. In his statement, Turnbull declared his faith in the ongoing Liberal-Nationals Coalition. Yet there are many danger points: how will Joyce behave on the backbench? Will he be a supporter or critic of the government? How will the Queensland Nationals react to the re-formed party? What happens to the Nationals in the regions?

Barnaby has done the right thing by remaining in parliament, going to the backbench and pledging to recontest New England. A comeback down the track is not impossible. His great supporter, Matt Canavan, said yesterday that Joyce as a political figure "helped pull the Nationals back from the grave". He said Barnaby "has more courage than most" and lauded him as a champion of the nation's wealth-producing industries such as farming, mining, forestry, fishing and manufacturing. The demise of Joyce is a symbol of our changing political culture and the rising tide of progressive ideology that Barnaby fought for so long with mixed results.