

The PM has once again revealed his glass jaw

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WHEN he stood before the press pack at his final media conference in late January 1966, Robert Menzies was asked what he considered to be his most lasting achievement.

Along with founding the Liberal Party, he said: “I look back with great satisfaction on the fact there has been a fruitful and constant alliance with the Country Party in the federal Parliament.”

Since his time, there have only been three other Liberal leaders to win an election from Opposition — Malcolm Fraser, John Howard and Tony Abbott. Knowing they owed their success not only to their own marginal seat members, but also to their junior partner, treating the National Party with respect was fundamental.

You see, while there’s more often than not a united purpose between the two parties that make up the Coalition, to confuse their unity of purpose as evidence of a merged entity misses the [distinct characters of both the Liberal and National parties](#).

To outsiders, I’ve always likened them to cousins rather than siblings; shared blood but not immediate family, with their own identities as well as common familial traits.



The Coalition during happier times, when Malcolm Turnbull joined Barnaby Joyce to toast his win in the New England by-election. (Pic: Lyndon Mechielsen)

When dealing with my counterparts, most notably the well-respected late David Whitrow, when we worked for the respective leaders, I was always mindful of the autonomy of the Nationals while at the same time striving for unity because growing up in the safest Coalition seat in the country, a Nationals electorate, I've had lived experience of their appeal in communities where the Liberal brand is less effective. The symbiotic relationship of these two conservative forces, each unable to govern without the other, has always been one of its strengths but the events of the past fortnight have put this "marriage" under great strain.

[The Coalition is Australia's most successful political partnership](#); I would argue it's even stronger than Labor's relationship with the union movement because it has delivered national government to the conservative side of politics more than it has to its opponents. That there's been stability in this partnership is a key part of the Coalition's longevity. That is of course, until the events of the last week.

The Barnaby Joyce imbroglio has moved beyond the matter of the Deputy Prime Minister's moral character, following an admitted, messy and badly managed affair with a former staffer, to a crisis that's engulfing the Coalition relationship and threatening the Turnbull government.

Barnaby Joyce might have lit the fire with his personal behaviour in recent months, but it was the Prime Minister who threw petrol on it when he strode out on Thursday and delivered a well-planned rebuke designed to elevate his moral standing at the expense of his deputy.

The words were delivered in crisp sound bites for the 6pm news yet when he told the Nationals leader he should consider his future while on leave, the barbs bounced like bullets through the adjoining windows of the Deputy Prime Minister's suite.

These were words that should only have been delivered in private between the two men, not used to diminish the leader of a party that was responsible for saving Turnbull's political skin at the devastating 2016 election. By effectively challenging Joyce's leadership — resign or your party room should sack you — Turnbull crossed a line, and in doing so, gave back a modicum of moral high ground to Joyce that had been absent since this story broke.

The Nationals may present as easygoing country types but when push comes to shove, they will dig in and fight. They don't like to be talked down to, patronised or taken for granted and in the Prime Minister's courtyard, that's exactly what happened.

As I watched Turnbull's castigation of Joyce turn from justified if belated moral outrage, to sanctimony — from indignation to righteousness and end up with overreach — I was taken back to a similar press conference he held in 2009 when he called for Kevin Rudd's resignation during the Godwin Grech affair.

[Malcolm Turnbull always goes too far.](#) He climbs up too high, he allows his ego to cloud what little political nous he has and when he fears he's being judged for the failures of others, his glass jaw is evident and his over-reaction has deadly consequences.

For a man who has almost all of the attributes you might want in a political leader, the quality most absent is judgment. In politics, you either have it or you don't. It's that tangible intangible that you most clearly discern when it is absent and, boy oh boy, is it absent in the Turnbull leadership.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull responded to Barnaby Joyce's comments during a visit to Hobart last week. (Pic: Rob Blakers)

Indeed, going back as far as his disastrous time as leader, I would argue that Mr Turnbull's never had it and that his other, brilliant, attributes blinded colleagues to this truth.

The handling of Barnaby Joyce's personal circumstances has been an abject lesson in political management; a masterclass in what not to do. Of course, blame for the mishandling most rests with Joyce but after he hit back on Friday calling the PM's remarks "inept", Turnbull was forced to admit in a badly handled press conference that he had in fact heard rumours of the extramarital affair. That he didn't deal with the rumours head on is a failure of his leadership; it wasn't a matter for his staff, or colleagues to address but a matter between two men who, as recently as the New England by-election, presented as close friends and not just as colleagues. If it ever emerges that Joyce told the Prime Minister of his affair, something the PM has repeatedly and strenuously denied, including in the Parliament, then this sorry mess gets a whole lot worse.

As it stands, the sadness for the Turnbull government is that it's been making policy headway in recent weeks and the results, like record job creation, were the start of a positive story to tell. I won't overstate the recent movement upwards in Newspoll because it still signalled a Labor win and makes it the 26th straight loss but things felt better. Bill Shorten was losing bark and while defending a one-seat majority remained a herculean task, hope was evident around the government corridors. Not anymore.

As Bob Hawke once said: "If you can't govern yourself, you can't govern the country." The Prime Minister is overseas next week and it has all got a lot harder.

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