

Payback time for death-wish Liberals



PM Scott Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton in parliament on Thursday. Picture: AAP

Dennis Shanahan, Political Editor, 12:00AM September 15, 2018

The atmosphere within the Liberal Party is now toxic enough to reduce Scott Morrison's chances of electoral victory from improbable to impossible, with personal vendettas, factional payback, paranoia and delusion taking hold of a sufficient number of Liberal members to destroy the Coalition government.

This group includes senior Liberals who believe the gutting of the government and the parliamentary Liberal Party are necessary before the party can "start again". There are others who don't care about bringing the government down.

These are disaffected Liberals who genuinely believe it would be better to be in opposition than government, or out of politics altogether, rather than continue in their present form. This is not widespread but it is a measure of the depth of bitterness.

What our readers had to say on Peta Credlin's jobs for the girls, a cartoonist's dark Knight of the soul, and Turnbull as a tweeting Tiberius.

The attitude is manifest on both the so-called conservative and moderate sides of the party among enough key figures for such an apocalyptic outcome to be imposed on the majority of Liberal — and Nationals — MPs.

The new Prime Minister emerged amid a disastrous situation, with scant likelihood of turning the ebbing tide into an election victory within the impossibly short time frame available — seven months at most before an election must be called.

For some of the cabinet ministers who moved against Malcolm Turnbull the primary aim was just to remove him as leader, regardless of who succeeded him, in the belief that under Turnbull the Coalition would lose catastrophically and the nature of the Liberal Party would be changed forever.

Like some of those Labor MPs who supported Kevin Rudd's return as prime minister in 2013 at the expense of Julia Gillard, there were Liberal MPs voting in the leadership ballots who just wanted change to "save the furniture" — that is, if the house is burning and can't be saved, at least preserve what you can to make rebuilding easier.

But, reflecting a strong current of US Republican feeling that a wholesale purge is required to redress the institutional political damage caused by the election of Donald Trump, there are Liberals who believe the Liberal house needs to be completely razed.

This is not a universal or majority view within the Liberals, but it doesn't require a majority for a cataclysm to occur, just a significant minority.

This is not empty conjecture. In the past month there has been enough on the public record to prove it: a majority of Liberal MPs did not want Turnbull to remain as prime minister; more people signed a petition demanding a partyroom meeting than voted for Peter Dutton as leader; more people voted for a leadership spill than voted for Dutton; Julie Bishop's 11-year tenure as deputy leader ended; and Turnbull's supporters leaked damaging stories against his "preferred" successor only days after he took the job.

What's more, Turnbull went public to revive Labor's faltering attack over Dutton's eligibility to be an MP, and Bishop joined Turnbull's threatening move against Morrison by leaving open the option of crossing the floor of parliament and voting with Labor to refer Dutton to the High Court.

Former deputy prime minister and Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce was happy to say what Morrison dare not admit in public: that Turnbull is trying “to remove us as the government”.

The Turnbull-Bishop intervention was a strike against Morrison as much as Dutton, and if the new Prime Minister loses a vote on the floor of parliament, it will be a vote of no-confidence in a leader who is already heading a minority government because of Turnbull’s resignation. This is one path to a potential early election, while the loss of the Wentworth by-election on October 20 is the second.

Morrison was also corralled by Turnbull supporters and the Labor side complaining about the “bullying” of female MPs and a lack of Liberal women into supporting a losing candidate in the Wentworth preselection. Ironically, given that key Turnbull supporters had been publicly calling for action on bullying and for quotas for female preselections Turnbull backed the ultimate male winner, Dave Sharma, in the preselection fight.

In the scheme of things the preselection rebuff is a minor scrape for Morrison, who faces a self-declared “mountain” of challenges just to make the Coalition competitive once more.

He has to sell himself to the voting public, he has to unite the Liberal Party while not giving in totally to the demands of conservatives or moderates, he has to deal with damaging claims of bullying and gender imbalance within the parliamentary party, he has to try to silence Turnbull, he has to win the Wentworth by-election, he has to prevent a High Court referral for Dutton, mollify Tony Abbott and Joyce, stop any crossing of the floor, damage Bill Shorten, lift the Liberal Party out of its lowest, longest of primary vote slump in Newspoll history and turn around Coalition support from an equal record low to a winnable position in less time than it took John Howard in 2001.

On the policy side he has to make up for a neglect of farmers in drought, demonstrate he can get power prices down, continue to keep the economy growing, reassure the electorate on the immigration rate and embark on infrastructure projects such as dams, rail and power generation.

The list is daunting but Morrison has made a credible start in the circumstances. Although a former treasurer and high-profile immigration minister, Morrison does not have wide public recognition and has to supplant

what negative views there are of him personally with a genuine picture of himself that is also a big contrast to Turnbull.

Yesterday Morrison, who has moved past both Turnbull and the Opposition Leader on personal ratings in just two Newspoll surveys, declared he was “a mortgage-belt Liberal” and had “stepped up” when the Liberals changed their mind about who would be leader. “We’re absolutely focused on what the public want; that’s the price of their mortgage, the price of their electricity, it’s the drought, all of these issues. That’s where my head is, I’m a mortgage-belt Liberal,” he said.

“I wasn’t seeking to change the leadership, as everyone knows, I stood very strongly with Malcolm. But the party formed a different view, so then they turned to me and I took up the call,” he said.

So Morrison is a suburban, mortgage holder — not “Mr Harbourside Mansion” — who had leadership basically thrust upon him, and he’s going to do the best he can.

But despite urging everyone to move on and get over it, even Morrison has to admit it’s been bad and will continue to be bad. Clearly, Turnbull and his supporters have doubts about just how close Morrison was to Turnbull and whether there wasn’t some calculation in those ballots that just didn’t add up as they should have.

“So we’ve just been getting on with it as fast and as quickly as we can. Sure, there’s going to be a bit of water that is still going to go under the bridge, a bit of dirty water under the bridge,” Morrison said yesterday.

It’s the dirty water that is Morrison’s biggest problem. His “Mr Ordinary” persona is working so far against Shorten — as well as in comparison with Turnbull — and there are small signs of some of the lost conservative votes coming back to the Coalition.

Morrison also “gets it” in terms of what voters want and just his presence has given the Coalition back the ascendancy in the sphere of handling energy and striving for lower prices. These are straws in the wind as Morrison launches into his herculean tasks, but they should serve as a lesson that if determination and energy count, he has a chance of achieving the impossible, particularly if Labor becomes overconfident and arrogant.

Of course, friends with a death wish in any sense can ensure an improbable task becomes impossible.

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