

James Campbell: Political show a cast of the old and the restless

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THE CAST of the long-running soap opera Coalition! returned to our screens this week after a two-week lay-off following the sudden exit of its leading man Malcolm Turnbull in dramatic circumstances.

The wisdom of the decision to write Turnbull out of the show has been occupying the cast and crew ever since.

Those behind the move remain convinced that viewers will end up preferring Scott Morrison, the blokey churchgoing family man from suburban Sydney, to his predecessor, the moneyed former merchant banker who dwelt in one of that city's harbourside mansions.

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OPINION: SCOTT MORRISON NEEDS TO ACT MORE LIKE PM

Turnbull's fans in Canberra are equally adamant however that the change will end up being a disaster and judging from the ratings so far, their fears would seem to be justified. Monday's Newspoll — the second since Turnbull's axing — has the ALP's primary vote on a whopping 42 per cent while the government is languishing on only 34 per cent.

That, it goes without saying, is diabolically bad for the non-Labor parties.

Forget all the talk about the results on questions about which leader the public most fancies as the prime minister; if those numbers, or anything like them, are replicated at the polling booths next year, the government is going to get slaughtered.



Why should we be expected to get over Malcolm Turnbull's removal as Prime Minister?

At the last election in 2016, the Coalition got 42.04 per cent of the primary vote and fell back into government — just — with a one-seat majority. On the other hand Labor with 34.73 per cent — not much more than third of the primary vote — came within seven seats of governing in its own right.

In other words, almost the only thing you need to know about federal elections is the Coalition has no chance of winning unless its primary vote is above 40 per cent, whereas the ALP can win in the high 30s — and when it cracks above 40 per cent, the only argument is how big its majority is going to be.

In Question Time on Wednesday, Scott Morrison taunted Bill Shorten to “get over it” when the opposition leader asked him for the umpteenth time to explain Turnbull's removal.

But why should we be expected to get over it?

The reasons provided when previous prime ministers have been dumped since Australian politics entered its Italian period 10 years ago might have been feeble and concealed more than they revealed — there was, for example, much more to Kevin Rudd’s removal than “a good government had lost its way” and “30 Newspolls in a row” in Tony Abbott’s case.

But at least voters were given reasons.



Scott Morrison has refused to answer Opposition Leader Bill Shorten as to why Malcolm Turnbull was removed. Picture: AAP

Dismissing last month’s fiasco as a Muppet Show, as Morrison did this week, was not only stupid in that it invited us all to speculate on which character in that much-loved children’s classic he most resembles, it was also kind of insulting to the — admittedly not massive — percentage of the Australian population that still likes to think we are being governed by people with our best interests at heart rather than a bickering crew of narcissists.

Moreover, Blind Freddy can see that whatever Morrison might want us to believe, this wasn’t a Seinfeld coup about nothing. It was about the Liberal

Party taking a turn to the right. Not the turn to the full-throated populist Trumpian Right that would probably have been seen if Peter Dutton and Tony Abbott had taken over — but a turn to the right nonetheless.

Morrison would be better to level with us on that front rather than trying to pretend that while nothing has changed everything has changed.

Admittedly, the fact that everyone from the previous regime bar Turnbull and Julie Bishop is still sitting comfortably in a ministerial office makes that a hard line to sell. But the reality of Australian politics is that prime ministers don't get that much choice over who they put into the ministry.



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There are only 226 MPs and Senators in Canberra, of which the government these days has not much more than half. Once you've ruled out the too old, the too young, the too drunk and too stupid, an Australian prime minister still has to make sure their ministry has representatives from every state and

territory, while balancing the need to include people from different factions and Senators and MPs.

It doesn't leave them with a great deal of choice.

In contrast, with a House of Commons of 650 members an incoming British prime minister can replace their predecessor's cabinet with ease. If the events of last month in Canberra had taken place at Westminster, it wouldn't have just been junior burgers like Victoria's Michael Sukkar and Queensland's James McGrath who would have found themselves sitting on the back bench.

Thinking about this, it is hard not to wonder whether the coup culture in Canberra has been created — at least in part — by the fact that most ministers must know that for them, personally, necking the prime minister is almost certainly likely to be a consequence-free exercise.

Getting back to Bill Shorten's demand that we be told the reason why Turnbull had to go, unfortunately for Morrison unless the ratings for the Coalition soap start to turn the Prime Minister's way very soon, the question isn't going to go away.

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