

Broad church will always be a balancing act for Liberals



“Scott Morrison won’t have the problems that I had as PM because no one is stalking him for his job,” writes Tony Abbott. Picture: AAP

Tony Abbott, 11:00PM October 28, 2018

Any political party that hopes to win a democratic election in its own right is inevitably a coalition of people with different interests and values. That’s been true both of the Labor Party and of the Liberal-National Coalition that between them have formed every government since 1949.

There has never been a time when the big parties have been free of differences within them, as well as between them. There have always been economic liberals and economic conservatives on both sides, and there have always been social conservatives and social progressives too — although the Liberals have been more economically liberal and less socially progressive, and Labor the reverse. And while the Coalition’s centre of gravity, as John Howard used to observe, has invariably been “economically liberal and socially conservative”, the extent to which the party has been “liberal” on some things and “conservative” on others has always depended on the political character of the leader and on the composition of the partyroom.

Differences of degree among senior members of the party are not new: think Howard (economically “dry”) and Andrew Peacock (“wet”); or Howard (a monarchist) and Peter Costello (a republican). Malcolm Turnbull and I are not the first (and won’t be the last) Liberal contemporaries to have lined up on

different sides of the internal divide. Think, for instance, of the NSW Liberal leadership team of Gladys Berejiklian (thought to be a moderate) and Dom Perrottet (undoubtedly a conservative). The NSW government has its issues (as all governments do) but no one says that it's paralysed by ideology or doesn't deserve to win the next election.

I respectfully disagree with Paul Kelly's assessment on this page last Wednesday that the Liberal Party (and the Coalition) is now almost irredeemably torn because it represents seats with a fundamentally different world-view. I accept that the view from Wentworth in Sydney's eastern suburbs differs from the view in Longman on the outer fringes of Brisbane; but when Kerry Phelp said last week that the big issues were ABC funding, climate change and getting children off Nauru, she said more about herself than about her new seat.

Socially progressive voters are certainly more numerous in Wentworth (where One Nation didn't run) than in Longman (where it has a 16 per cent vote) but it's also worth noting that the Liberal vote in Wentworth was higher in 2013 (with a more conservative leader) than in 2016 (with a more progressive one).

Kelly is right that internal differences are harder to manage in the era of 24/7 mainstream media plus the social media echo chamber. Still, being in opposition is in no one's interests. A looming election concentrates the mind wonderfully. As well, the protest factors at work right now will fade once voters have to choose between a middle-of-the-road Coalition government and what would be the most left-wing Labor government in our history.

Howard was correct to say in *The Weekend Australian* that nothing "is more important than the relationship between the prime minister and the men and women who comprise the parliamentary party". The differences between Liberal MPs do matter; but not nearly as much as how they're managed. Howard, for instance, was better at managing his colleagues in his second stint as leader than he'd been in his first.

In my judgment, it's much less a philosophical divide that's hurt the party over the past five years than a clash of personalities. I'm confident that the internals will be better handled now that some leading players have changed.

There were a lot of big egos, huge ambitions and differing philosophical outlooks in the Howard cabinet, but colleagues hardly ever leaked against each

other. Costello, for instance, has never been given enough credit for the honourable way in which he handled the differences that he sometimes had with his leader. Peacock had Howard in his shadow cabinet and vice versa. For his part, Howard always ensured that his cabinet reflected the Liberal Party's "broad church". When Turnbull decided to stay in parliament in 2010, I had him on my frontbench and kept him there in government — along with Julie Bishop, Christopher Pyne and George Brandis. Turnbull never returned the compliment. His problem was not that he had too many conservatives in his partyroom but that he didn't have enough of them in his cabinet.

All prime ministers face challenges and all make mistakes. Still, Scott Morrison won't have the problems that I had as PM because no one is stalking him for his job. He won't have the problems Turnbull had as PM because he is a much more tribal Liberal; and because he's done the best he could, under the circumstances, to acknowledge the two biggest personalities on his backbench.

Although Morrison appreciates that our party does best when it's led from the centre-right, he hasn't abandoned Turnbull's commitment to emissions reduction nor changed the immigration policy. He's kept Snowy 2.0 and Gonski 2.0. He hasn't solved the challenge to religious freedom in the era of identity politics and ultra-left activism — and he probably can't. What he won't ever find, though, is any personal hostility from the so-called Right, because he has no wish to marginalise them inside the party.

There will always be some Liberals who want the party to go further on climate change or be more compassionate on boatpeople. There will always be others to question turning the economy upside down when it won't make any difference to emissions, and to caution against anything that might embolden the people-smugglers. It's not a question of decency versus hardness of heart but of what really is the most humane thing to do. The leader's job is to get the balance right.

It goes without saying that the next election will be tough. But under Morrison, it won't be internal division that holds us back. We can't change the self-inflicted wounds of the past five years, the squandered majority, and the fact that we're seeking a third term against the Labor Party, the Greens, the unions and GetUp.

But against this, Morrison will have a fierce will to win, unbounded energy, political savvy, and the whole Liberal tribe cheering him on.

Former PM Tony Abbott is the Liberal member for Warringah.

