

Turnbull joins miserable ghosts haunting living rooms



Malcolm Turnbull with his family in Halloween fancy dress. Picture: Instagram.

Gerard Henderson, Columnist, 12:00AM November 3, 2018

It was a Friday night in early March 2008 when I received a call from Malcolm Turnbull on my home phone. The (then) shadow treasurer was in an agitated state. He told me Brendan Nelson, who succeeded John Howard as Liberal Party leader in December 2007, was hopeless and should step down.

I was not a Liberal Party member and I certainly did not have a vote in the partyroom. I doubted Nelson would be a successful opposition leader. However, I reminded Turnbull that Nelson had been leader for only a couple of months and that he deserved time.

Turnbull's position was that the Liberal Party would collapse unless Nelson was replaced by him. I advised patience and we never spoke about the issue again.

As it turned out, Turnbull successfully challenged Nelson for the Liberal Party leadership in September 2008 and held the position until he was replaced by Tony Abbott in December 2009.

The lesson from that exchange a decade ago was that Turnbull is impulsive and impatient.

There is more evidence of this right now. A month ago the former prime minister was recorded making the following comment at a forum in New York: “When you stop being prime minister, that’s it. There is no way I’m going to be hanging around like embittered Kevin Rudd or Tony Abbott ... these people are like some sort of miserable, miserable ghosts.”

Turnbull is a clever man. So he would have expected that his “miserable ghosts” reference would raise attention. Rudd took the bait, Abbott remained silent. Returning to Sydney on October 22, Turnbull defended his decision not to publicly support Liberal candidate Dave Sharma in the Wentworth by-election on the basis that he had retired from politics. Then on Wednesday the ABC’s Q&A announced that Turnbull would be appearing on a special program next Thursday. There will be no one else on the panel. From retiree to miserable ghost in just more than a couple of weeks, it seems.

ABC news and current affairs is in such poor shape at the moment that it cannot run a specialist current affairs program on its main channel late at night. The once news-setting Lateline died recently while on Emma Alberici’s watch, which leaves Q&A.

During the early period of the Abbott government, Q&A presenter Tony Jones and executive producer Peter McEvoy used the program to promote Turnbull. It provided an opportunity for the ambitious Liberal to put on his leather jacket and appeal to a green-left audience on what are called progressive issues.

In the lead-up to the 2013 election, the ABC’s Lateline and Q&A effectively had promoted Clive Palmer, then head of the Palmer United Party. Palmer narrowly defeated Liberal Party candidate Ted O’Brien in the Queensland seat of Fairfax.

As Abbott said on Sky News’ The Bolt Report on Monday, the ABC criticises the Coalition and the Labor Party from the Left. That’s why the public broadcaster is so loved by the Greens and self-proclaimed “progressives”. The ABC is a conservative-free-zone without a conservative presenter, producer or editor on any of its prominent television, radio or online outlets, and many of its panels go to air without the voice of even one conservative commentator.

However, the ABC has plenty of time to hear from disaffected present or former Liberal Party members. That’s why John Hewson appears so often on the public broadcaster. And that’s why Malcolm Fraser received such a friendly

reception when he appeared on Q&A in 2010 with Jones in the presenter's chair. Stand by for many appearances by Turnbull in the years ahead.

The unfashionable fact — which dare not speak its name on the ABC or in Fairfax Media — is that Turnbull is primarily responsible for the Coalition's present circumstances. He lost 14 seats to Labor in the July 2016 election. It was Turnbull's idea to call a double-dissolution election, including an eight-week campaign. It was Turnbull's decision to run a meaningless "jobs and growth" campaign and not take the attack to Bill Shorten and Labor on issues such as border protection and trade union abuse of power. It was the worst campaign by a government in recent memory.

Turnbull led the Coalition to a narrow one-seat majority. Then, after he was replaced by Scott Morrison, he quit Wentworth causing an unnecessary by-election. Then he intervened from New York by publicly advising the Prime Minister to refer Peter Dutton's eligibility to sit in parliament to the High Court. Then from Indonesia he criticised Morrison's decision to consider relocating the Australian embassy in Tel Aviv to Israel's capital in Jerusalem.

It was perfectly appropriate for Turnbull to discuss this matter with Indonesian President Joko Widodo when he represented Australia at the oceans conference in Bali. Where Turnbull erred was in talking to the media about his personal views following the meeting. That was entering the political debate, something he said he would not do three weeks ago. Turnbull gave the impression he believed Australia's position on Israel should be determined by the attitude of the government in Indonesia. No former Liberal leader has been as disruptive as Turnbull so soon after losing the top position. The fact is that Abbott was quiet in the lead-up to the 2016 election. When Turnbull rejected Howard's advice and refused to give his predecessor a good job after the 2016 election, Abbott made life tough for Turnbull, as he is quoted as acknowledging in David Speers's new book, *On Mutiny* (MUP).

Before the leadership change, Morrison advised Turnbull not to initiate a spill. He did. Morrison then supported Turnbull against Dutton's challenge. When it was obvious Turnbull had lost the support of most of his colleagues, Morrison entered the contest and won. His reward is to be attacked and criticised by his predecessor in full miserable ghosts mode — soon to be brought to us all in its entirety on Q&A.