

Someone is pulling the indies' strings ... like to take a guess?



Malcolm Turnbull visits the then newly elected member for Chisolm Julia Banks in Oakleigh in 2016.
Picture: Jake Nowakowski

Janet Albrechtsen, Columnist, 12:00AM February 6, 2019
292 Comments

One of the biggest frauds perpetrated on the Australian electorate this year will be the idea that so-called “indies” are independents in the upcoming federal election.

The way they spin their own story, with the help of some of the media, provides a local example of fake news. These fake indies, intent on unseating a handful of senior Liberals, may not be members of major parties but their script about climate change action and representing the sensible centre screams uniformity, not difference.

Whether they are patsies or puppets, there is inevitable speculation about who might be pulling their strings. Could it be someone with a grudge, and a history of claiming to represent the sensible centre while demanding expensive action on climate change that only the rich can afford?

Last week, Malcolm Turnbull was further marked down in senior government circles as the culprit who has one final act in Australian politics: to bring down the Morrison government and destroy those who tossed him out for being a

poor prime minister last year, using his totemic issue of demanding further action on climate change.

A crazy conspiracy theory? To be sure, it's fuelled partly by those who loathe Turnbull. His arrogance and narcissism, at intergalactic levels even by Canberra standards, and his poor political judgment meant he harnessed little loyalty from Liberal troops.

Putting aside political animosities, evidence suggests senior Liberals are right to ask whether the former prime minister is indulging in political dark arts. For starters, Turnbull's political history points to a man who burns people who thwart his ambition. Following the 2007 election, when Brendan Nelson beat Turnbull for the leadership, Turnbull wasted no time in tearing Nelson down. Within weeks, he called Nelson's chief of staff, Peter Hendy, who recounted the conversation to a Fairfax journalist.

Hendy said: "Turnbull told me that my job was to get Brendan to resign in the next few weeks because Brendan was hopeless and he would damage the Liberal brand so much that by the time he, Turnbull, took over, the next - election would no longer be winnable." Turnbull said much the same to Nelson.

Back then Turnbull was, to coin a Churchillian phrase, the bull who carried around his own china shop. He may have curbed some of that political impatience, but not the vengeance, or the lack of self-awareness.

When Turnbull lost the prime ministership to Scott Morrison last year, he did everything he could to destroy the Morrison government. Turnbull refused to help Liberal candidate Dave Sharma during the Wentworth by-election. Those close to Turnbull pleaded with him to write a letter supporting Sharma. He refused.

This level of vengeance has Liberals wondering about Turnbull's hand in the rise of a batch of fake independents, assisted by GetUp, running against his longstanding nemesis Tony Abbott, Greg Hunt too for voting against Turnbull in the leadership coup, and even the member for Mackellar, Jason Falinski. The so-called independents have this in common with Turnbull — a fixation on more action on climate change.

Even if they lose, they will boost Labor's chance to take the seats with - increased preferences.

Turnbull's festering resentment towards the Liberal Party, not just for stripping him of the leadership in 2009, and the prime ministership last year, can be sourced to this single policy disagreement. Turnbull picked the issue himself after the partyroom rebuffed his support for Kevin Rudd's emissions trading scheme.

Recall Turnbull's famous rejoinder in October 2009: "I will not lead a party that is not as committed to effective action of climate change as I am." And Abbott's response: "OK then, don't."

After losing the leadership to Abbott in December that year, Turnbull delivered a scathing attack on the Coalition's climate change policy, calling any suggestion that emissions could be dramatically cut without cost "bullshit". His problem, then and now, is that most Australians are unwilling to bear that cost.

When he returned as leader in 2015, with electricity bills sky high, blackouts across southeastern Australia, and Labor's lunatic renewable energy targets introducing massive instability into the grid, Turnbull remained quiet about the fact that he was leading a party with different views on climate change policy to his.

Ousted as PM last year, it fits past form for Turnbull to retaliate again, with climate change his chosen stalking horse. His son, Alex, not known for a big streak of independence, was helpful in carrying on the climate change crusade during the Wentworth election, telling voters not to vote for the Liberal Party, and raising money for Labor. Last week Turnbull junior said he is "involved" in Julia Banks's campaign to unseat Hunt in Flinders, south of Melbourne.

While Turnbull's son said "MT is not involved in the slightest" and Turnbull's spokesman said the former PM is "staying out of the political fray", some Liberals think otherwise.

And perhaps for good reason.

Take Banks, whose claim of being an independent invites utter derision. Indeed, she has become a laughing stock on the two issues she picked for her "vote independent" campaign: female empowerment and climate change. As to the former, Banks resigned as a Liberal after Turnbull's ousting, earning a reputation as the patsy for the man who is intent on bringing down the government. Riding Turnbull's coat-tails is not female empowerment. When

asked last week on ABC Radio whether she had spoken to Turnbull about running in Flinders prior to her announcement, Banks said Malcolm and Lucy were “good friends”. Huh?

Turnbull’s praise for the Liberal turncoat, describing Banks as “an outstanding parliamentarian”, suggests he is cheering on his “independent” fangirl to defeat a Liberal minister. That’s shabby behaviour.

Her claim to have “unfinished business” on climate change action is equally shabby. She told the ABC’s Rafael Epstein that “we should meet or exceed the Paris targets”. That was news to Jane Hume, a Victorian Liberal MP who once supported Banks. Hume said she had never heard Banks raise such matters on climate change in the partyroom. A new-found conviction then? Maybe one assisted by her good friend, the former PM, and his son.



Zali Steggall in Manly.

The independent story from Abbott’s challengers in the NSW seat of Warringah is equally unpersuasive. When Alice Thompson, an ex-Turnbull staffer, put her hand up to run against Abbott, she singled out the need for climate change action. When Olympian Zali Steggall threw her higher-profile name in the Warringah ring, it was about climate change too and she attacked the government’s 26 per cent renewable energy target as too low. GetUp is

right behind her and, happily for Steggall, the ex-Turnbull staffer has decided to run in the seat of Mackellar against Falinski, to avoid splitting votes from Steggall. Falinski publicly admonished Turnbull for his absence during the Wentworth election.

In fact, all fake indies can expect support from GetUp, which shares the same obsession on climate change action as Turnbull. GetUp has drawn up a “most wanted” deck of cards, whose top targets are all men, all conservatives, and all sit in the House of Representatives. The sole aim is to bring down the Morrison government.

Not all of this necessarily adds up to the Turnbells’ final act of political vengeance to destroy his Liberal enemies and the Morrison government. But it is not unreasonable for Liberals to think some of it does. And Turnbull has only himself to blame for that.