



Abbott should not be written off. Picture: John Feder/The Australian

Andrew Bolt: Times may suit Abbott again

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There is an unspoken reason why Malcolm Turnbull, GetUp! and global warming groups are frantically trying to get Tony Abbott kicked out of politics in the May election.

This huge drive to defeat the former prime minister isn't because Abbott holds a marginal seat. He doesn't.

It isn't because his Warringah seat is the one seat keeping the Liberals in government. There are dozens of more marginal Liberal seats, and the fall of any one would hand the election to Labor.

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And it isn't simply because Turnbull and global warming groups hate Abbott's guts, though they most certainly do. Turnbull is almost insane with rage that Abbott, in his mind, cost him his own prime ministership.

No, only one factor explains this huge effort to defeat Abbott. It's the fear that he could once more lead the Liberals. If you're laughing, it's because you've

bought the media spin that Abbott is finished. A joke. A dinosaur. Yesterday's man.

If that were true, why does Abbott scare them so much?

Why? It's not just because he is a proven warrior, one of only three Liberal leaders who have won government from opposition. It is also because the Liberals after the election are likely to face a brutally simple choice: it's either Abbott as leader — if he survives this campaign, that is — or it's almost no one.

There will be only two other obvious candidates, both just as wounded as Abbott, and neither with his record of winning against the odds.

As I said last week, Sportsbet's seat-by-seat market is one of our best guides to which Liberals MPs will actually be left after the election tsunami. It tips that Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton will lose, as will other frontbenchers once suggested as future leaders such as Attorney-General Christian Porter and Health Minister Greg Hunt. Of course, some of these predictions may not come true. Dutton has a huge election war chest, and Hunt is a great local campaigner.

But add also the resignations of other former leadership contenders — Turnbull, former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Christopher Pyne — and who will be left to lead a shattered party?

There will be Scott Morrison, of course, now the Prime Minister. But a heavy election defeat will make him seem a loser who failed to inspire.

The only other likely candidate will be his ambitious deputy, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg. Frydenberg will appeal as a healer who can talk to both sides of this divided party. But can he talk to voters? What exactly does he stand for, and what economic legacy will he represent, given that the economy under his brief watch is slowing sharply?

Of course, the party might opt for a near-unknown that no one hates, but such risk-aversion rarely ends well. Think of the hapless Brendan Nelson, who took over after the Howard government crashed.

Which leaves Abbott. Helping him will be that the Liberals after the election will again be overwhelmingly conservative, given how many of the Left are resigning or likely to lose.

Second, the party is likely to again want a leader who argues for the Liberal values that the Liberals in government seemed to junk, like free speech and small government.

Third, they will need someone with the brains, guts and record to attack Labor where they will be most exposed at the next election in three years — global warming.

The economy is likely to slow and Labor's crazy global warming targets will prove horrifically expensive. The times may suit a Liberal leader who told you so.

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Of course, Abbott is flawed and wounded. His reputation has been trashed by his media enemies and even (suicidally) by the Liberals themselves when led by the vindictive Turnbull. Voters will also remember that as prime minister he was too rigid, awkward, punitive, conservative and dependent on the tightest of inner circles.

Yet no other Liberal MP better understands the cultural war which the Liberals have not just lost but too often surrendered to like whipped dogs. No other Liberal MP has such courage in returning fire and in framing a devastating argument in just a few sharp words.

And none is more likely to inspire loyalists to fight an important battle, even in a losing cause.

As Greens do, but Liberals rarely.

So do not write him off. And, no, I don't write this just because I call Abbott a friend. I write this because so many powerful forces call him their enemy, and we know what they fear.