

## Turnbull isn't challenging – just inviting the Liberals to make the comparison

Written by The Conversation

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Malcolm Turnbull walked the high wire in a masterful Q&A performance on Monday night, as he displayed his credentials for leadership.

Turnbull was neither loyal nor disloyal to Tony Abbott. He ran the government's case but managed to stand apart from the prime minister. He made his dissent on certain matters crystal clear by simply digging in and refusing to be drawn. He didn't need to be overtly critical. It was all in the tone, the comparison.

It was a risky decision to appear on the program, where trapping politicians is the name of the game. The fact that Turnbull chose to do so – a week after the spill motion against Abbott was headed off but with the prime minister still floundering – told a story in itself.

Turnbull won't declare his mission, but the message is, I'm available, and I'm showing you my leader's skill set.

At the start of the program, Turnbull sounded prime ministerial when speaking about the two men facing execution in Indonesia.

"If I can address this to the Indonesian government – it is not a sign of weakness to spare the lives of these men. Yes, they have committed very terrible crimes. Yes, they knew that the death penalty was there if they were caught and found guilty. But it is not weak to spare their lives. It is a sign of the strongest love, the greatest mercy when you extend it to those who least deserve it."

Brought back to domestic politics, Turnbull spoke for many in the Liberal Party with his paean of praise for sacked whip Philip Ruddock.

Abbott, Turnbull said, "is entitled to appoint and replace the chief whip as and when he wishes.

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“It was Tony’s call ... he is the one who has to explain it but I just want to say I think Philip Ruddock is a great Liberal, a great parliamentarian and it was a very sad day for all of us when we learnt his services as chief whip had been terminated by the prime minister.”

And then the killer line: “[Tony] is the captain – he can make a captain’s call”.

On the Human Rights Commission report about children in detention, Turnbull was armed with figures to strongly press the government’s argument – how the numbers incarcerated have dropped dramatically.

But Turnbull wasn’t signing up to the vitriolic attack by Abbott and ministers on the commission and its president Gillian Triggs for being “blatantly partisan”.

“The real issue is the children ... I’m not going to run a commentary on my colleagues.”

Abbott boasted last week he was good at fighting Labor. Turnbull, by his challenges to fellow panellist Labor’s Catherine King to state Labor’s stand on the general budgetary problem, sent the message that he too can take the battle up to the opposition.

Besides, in turning on King, Turnbull neatly avoided the questioning about the thorny subject of Abbott’s chief of staff, Peta Credlin.

Pushed on the government’s budget failures, Turnbull admitted the key point – and then soared into a moment of extravagant Malcolmesque indulgence.

“The fact that we haven’t been able to get a lot of this through means that mistakes have been made.” Turnbull invoked “the great lawmaker Solon who wrote the first laws of Athens”, who was apparently a pragmatist about having laws accepted.

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“You have to get your laws through, you have to get the public to accept them, the parliament to accept them. We just have to do a better job of advocacy,” Turnbull said.

The ideal dorothy dixer came at the end: how do you restore faith in the political process?

Set out a vision, said Turnbull, describe where you want to go.

“What is your goal? You have to explain that. That’s absolutely critical.

“Then you’ve got to explain honestly, not dumbing it down, honestly, the problems that we face. What is the problem with the budget? What is the problem with dealing with the NBN ... pick a topic but explain it and lay it out factually and then lay out what the options are.”

“I think government and opposition should be prepared to put their cards on the table, and actually have a debate about the measures. You never know, out of that debate, you might come up with a third solution that is better than either of those that are originally proposed.”

Ramming home (to viewers) his reasonableness and (to colleagues) his potential electoral appeal, Turnbull observed that “Australian political contests are won or lost at the sensible centre”.

Politicians had to “treat the people with respect”. Not throw slogans at them or pretend problems didn’t exist.

“The challenge for us as political communicators is to take complex problems and explain them in a clear way, not in a simplistic way. We have got to be much better at explaining the problems, because once you’ve explained the problem, people will accept the need for a solution and then you’ll have a competition about what the right solution is.”

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Turnbull made the political fight sound almost civilised.

Earlier on Monday, a radio interviewer asked Abbott:

“What are you going to do with Malcolm Turnbull? It’s like, you are the captain and you have got a bloke who has his eyes on your job and he has always had his eyes on the prime ministership. Do you resent his open ambition?”

To which the prime minister gave the rather extraordinary reply: “Well, no, I encourage it. I encourage it.”

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