

The next stage of parliamentary life will be the toughest character test Abbott has faced in politics

Written by The Conversation USA

Tony Abbott's plan for a long-term political future provides an irritant for Malcolm Turnbull but, at least between now and the election, it shouldn't be much more than that.

Voters are well and truly over Abbott, which is why his colleagues dumped him. The electorate's attention is now on his successor.

It's another story with the media – Abbott will attract headlines for whatever he says. And given his resentment over his ousting and the mutual animosity and distrust between him and Turnbull, his comments will be viewed through the Abbott-Turnbull prism regardless of his motives. But the public will apply a discount factor if Abbott seems to be indulging in sour grapes and Abbott would be wise to think of his own reputation.

Abbott's natural friction points with Turnbull are in areas such as national security, climate change, same-sex marriage and the like. Turnbull, notably in his trip to the US, has established himself as solid on the security front despite some party conservatives still not being fully satisfied. Same-sex marriage is in hibernation until after the election because Turnbull accepted Abbott's process of a plebiscite. Turnbull is committed not to make major changes to climate policy.

The big debate that will dominate the next few months is about tax. Whether, and how, Abbott engages with that debate will be carefully watched.

High-profile party conservatives dumped by Turnbull such as Eric Abetz are glad to have Abbott stay, to help hold the ideological torch aloft. But some conservative MPs, especially those in marginal seats, will want to see him behave in a collegial manner. Ideology tends to take second-place when you are fighting over the votes, usually in the political centre, that will determine whether your parliamentary career continues or ends. Signs of division are unhelpful.

Abbott did not have attractive alternatives so it is unsurprising that he is continuing on. Business did not beckon; he is not interested in a diplomatic post; the speaking circuit is limited.

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Apart from his time in journalism, his career has been politics – as a staffer, advocate, and for more than two decades as an MP. The parliamentary kennel is familiar and to that extent comforting.

But the future won't be easy for him. He wants to continue to have a voice in the national political debate but needs to avoid it being a destructive one.

If Abbott believes he could one day again be leader, he is deluding himself. He cannot re-run the Kevin Rudd script. Even after his overthrow Rudd remained popular, a popularity he was able to leverage into a return when Julia Gillard was set to lead Labor to a wipeout. Abbott will never have that lever of popularity, and in the short time between now and the election Turnbull is unlikely to crash disastrously in the public's esteem – certainly not against Bill Shorten.

Post-Turnbull, whenever that time comes, the Liberals will move on to the next generation.

There isn't a way back onto the frontbench before the election and probably never. And carving out a constructive place from the backbench is very challenging. No doubt there are book offers. There are also causes, especially in one area to which he has been committed – Indigenous affairs.

And then there is the broader role but to perform it well is tricky. There is no reason why Abbott should not be a significant force in the conservative wing of the party, but his influence should be used to benefit his party as whole, not just his part of it. Otherwise he will be racking up another failure.

While this next stage of Abbott's parliamentary career will be a fascinating political story, for Abbott personally it will be the hardest test of character he has faced in his life in politics. Will he wallow in his fury and frustration about what happened or rise above it to do something worthwhile?

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