

It is hard to imagine the emotions of Tony Abbott or Peta Credlin as they read journalist Niki Savva's indictment, in *The Road to Ruin*, of the former prime minister's pig-headedness and his former chief-of-staff's bullying behaviour.

They can condemn it as a one-sided account – they weren't contacted for comment. But they live with the terrible realisation that if they'd done things differently, the reins of power could still be in their hands. Abbott threw away a prime ministership that a decade ago few would have thought he would ever achieve. He was the accidental leader who, once in government, made the least of a huge opportunity.

Credlin was drunk with power and her belief she was indispensable to Abbott – a view he shared. She made him dependent in a way that helped cost him his job and has been immensely destructive not just for both of them, but for many around them.

The fate of most prime ministers is to end badly. In some instances, notably John Howard, that end – losing an election and in his case his seat – is more than offset by what was done while in power. When he celebrated the 20th anniversary of his government's election last week, Howard was a happy man.

Abbott is at the other end of the spectrum. He will be remembered by history as the first-term prime minister rolled by his party, rather than for what he achieved in his brief time in the top job. He will always look back in anger, filled with resentment and misery.

Savva has got many people on the record with their tales of Credlin's apparently atrocious conduct towards them. Former staffers and MPs seemed to have used this book as the chance for a catharsis.

According to these accounts and what we already knew, Credlin did not just obsessively control big things and small – whether Abbott met the Papua New Guinea prime minister, refurbishment of The Lodge – but she made life a nightmare for those subject to her authority and many who were not.

What's most interesting, and inexplicable, was Abbott's subservience. When it came to Credlin, the he-man was a pussy cat, like the husband who walks on eggshells because he fears his wife's displeasure and moods.

Theories for this canvassed by Savva and others include his susceptibility to the influence of strong women, Credlin being the most dramatic example, and his judgement that he owed everything to her. His psychological dependence was built on gratitude and loyalty but went way beyond. Perhaps under his dogmatic certainty lies a deep personal insecurity.

His colleagues struggled to understand the relationship and – without success – to deal with its consequences. Savva recounts how Liberal senator Connie Fierravanti-Wells, a conservative from NSW who had long known Abbott, confronted him directly. Fierravanti-Wells told him the perception, that needed to be addressed, was he and Credlin were having an affair. He flatly denied this, as Credlin did in a later conversation with the senator.

It was a tough thing for Fierravanti-Wells to say to Abbott, and indeed now to put on the record for this book.

We have to accept their denials.

Some critics have said the book should not have raised the matter of a possible affair – that the only thing relevant was the co-dependency. Even Savva says it doesn't really matter whether there was an affair or not.

While generally believing that politicians' private lives should be kept that way, I can't agree that this should be forbidden territory. First, because there was a great deal of speculation about the source of Credlin's sway over Abbott, and the implications for the government. And second, because such intimacy can be politically relevant. One thinks of Jim Cairns and Junie Morosi, and Cheryl Kernot and Gareth Evans.

There are some notable parallels with the Cairns-Morosi political pairing, though Morosi had none of the knowledge or political background of Credlin. Morosi, as his staffer, was controlling

and excessively protective of Cairns, then-deputy prime minister in the Whitlam government. She was a gate shutter, and that provoked enormous resentment.

Morosi's disproportionate influence over Cairns was disastrous, although the timeframe was short. This is a better comparison with Credlin/Abbott than others mentioned – Wallis Simpson/Edward VIII, or Ainslie Gatto/John Gorton.

Abbott on Monday issued a brief statement saying “the best response to this book is the objective record of the Abbott government”. He listed achievements, declaring that “a dysfunctional opposition couldn't win an election and a dysfunctional government couldn't have got so much done in just two years.

“That said, I'm not in the business of raking over old coals nor am I in the business of responding to scurrilous gossip and smear. Apart from being a good local MP, my focus is on the election of the Turnbull government ... not an unreconstructed Labor Party with its five new taxes.”

Actually, focusing on the future is going to be very hard for Abbott for a long time. Even when he talks about the future, the frame is the past.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/abbott-and-credlin-and-the-death-of-a-prime-ministership-55883>