

Too strong to deliver? Malcolm Turnbull's leadership dilemma

Written by The Conversation USA

When Malcolm Turnbull decisively ousted Tony Abbott, it seemed Australia might have the longed-for leader who would set a clear agenda and lead Australia out of a period of policy inertia.

Under Abbott, it the country appeared stuck in a policy rut, frozen by fear about the future. Neither government nor opposition could communicate to a concerned electorate how the future would unfold.

Nor was it clear how we would negotiate a path to ongoing prosperity after the heady years of the China-induced mining boom or face what were some big policy challenges facing Australia.

Would I be unemployed if [robots destroyed one in two jobs](#) , as many predicted? Would we really be expected to work until 70, as the [Intergenerational Report](#) suggested we needed to? And what sort of retirement would we get to enjoy anyway if government pursued policies to cut back on pension eligibility or tax superannuation?

How much HECs debt would our kids be burdened with once the education sector was deregulated, and universities and colleges were free to set their own tuition fees? Between these and other issues, no one, it seemed, would be protected from what appeared to be the perfect political storm: the need for government to spend and act, and a growing sense of budget crisis.

In this confusion, [Malcolm Turnbull took the reins](#) and quickly sought to stamp himself as a powerful and decisive – almost presidential – political leader.

He sought to create a narrative for the future - there was never a [more exciting time to be an Australian](#) , he assured the electorate.

[Innovation and the ideas boom](#) were the means to create future prosperity after the end of the mining boom. By embracing technology and its possibilities, taking risks and being entrepreneurial, Australians would together find a way to navigate a prosperous and fair future.

The fear and scepticism is back

In just six months, much of this [new-found optimism has dissipated](#) . Like the three Prime Ministers before him, Turnbull has struggled to develop and sustain a viable narrative about the future – what it looks like and how he would lead us there.

Nor is it clear to many whether we have entered a new phase of more collegial cabinet decision making. The electorate still faces the uniform messaging across ministers on an issue, with little sense that ministers lead policy development in their own portfolio areas.

The bold narrative of innovation as the future appears increasingly constrained by the old political realities. Policy ideas are floated and quickly shelved. The focus of attention shifts from week to week, with major policy issues unresolved. Relationship between government and the crossbenches has been increasingly fraught.

The myth of the strong leader

Over the past few weeks, Malcolm Turnbull has sought to assert himself again as a string, decisive, leader. The budget has been brought forward, and parliament has been recalled to pass the [ABCC legislation](#) , with the [threat of a double dissolution should they not do so](#) .

But will this form of strong leadership prove more successful? In a detailed analysis of political leadership, UK academic Archie Brown has argued that [the dominance of the strong leader in politics is a myth](#) . Brown contends that driven by an inflated sense of their own importance, or defeated by hubris, strong political leaders fail to deliver sustainable outcomes. They simply don't work in a democratic system.

In light of the fate of our last three prime ministers – Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott – Brown's analysis has some purchase here. All three wanted to be seen as strong leaders – leaders with the answers to our problems, capable of changing the way politics work. But, in the end, they all struggled to find a way to articulate what type of leader they would in office.

In a dynamic and often unforgiving environment, Brown argues that effective political leaders need to move between actively taking the lead and setting the agenda, and receding in importance by creating an environment for others to exercise leadership. Good government, as our prime minister has reminded us, is ultimately a collegial project in which ministers should play a far more important role in their own portfolio areas than their leader.

Malcom Turnbull's leadership dilemma

Turnbull's leadership is hamstrung by a number of political realities that make it hard to maintain the position of a strong leader. However, the alternative to strong leadership is not weak leadership.

How could this be changed? To begin with, we don't have a viable narrative about the future and how the major policy dilemmas noted above are to be resolved – and done so in a way that allows for budget repair. No leader can hope to create this on their own and, it may be that the best approach will have Malcom Turnbull avoid pithy phrases about his excitement about the future, and allow ministers to lead this public discussion, not shut them down, as Treasurer Scott Morrison is alleged to have faced in the recent public discussion around taxation reforms.

The second issue that Malcom Turnbull faces is the ongoing struggle to win support of the cross benches. With the exception of John Howard's final term, this is a problem that has constrained Australian governments for a long time. Effective political leadership in this context is always a negotiated outcome. Again, managing the Senate seems to be something that successive Australian governments have forgotten how to do. This is of course no easy feat at a time when the cross benches represent an unpredictable collection of parties and individuals.

But my prediction is that in coming political cycles, the problem of a more fragmented set of representatives will continue to constrain what policies government can pursue.

The third major issue is how to build political capital within his own party. Despite assurances that there would be no backstabbing and undermining, Abbott and his supporters aggrieved by the outcome of the leadership challenge, have maintained a not-so-secret campaign to defend the Abbott government's credentials and criticise any shifts in political direction contemplated by a Turnbull government. Strangely, this may be best dealt with by ensuring that at least some of these supporters have a role to play in shaping Turnbull's policy agenda.

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Finally, the electorate appears impatient with political leaders who promise to deliver the world, but only to find that political realities make this impossible. This will of course be once again put to the test when the Turnbull government delivers its first budget – and, in effect, its first set of election promises in a long campaign.

Here, government is in a bind. Promise too much, it may win the election, but face an impatient electorate quick to reject under-performance. But do too little to address some big policy issues, it runs the risk of failing to making a winning bid in the upcoming auction for votes. Either way, Malcolm Turnbull faces a difficult leadership challenge.

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