

Turnbull should not be spooked by Liberal conservatives

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

As he struggles with the lessons of the recent past and the challenges of the immediate future, Malcolm Turnbull needs to avoid two dangers.

One is being spooked by the conservatives inside and outside the Liberal Party. The other is failing to make good decisions about his frontbench.

The divide within the Liberals' so-called "broad church" is surely at the sharpest it has ever been in recent memory. But, in terms of outspokenness and advocacy, it's also one-sided. The moderates are not out there shouting. Nor are the Liberals who are neither militant moderates nor hardline conservatives but rather middle-of-the-road pragmatists. The noise is coming from the right.

Turnbull has taken responsibility for the election campaign, as he should. The mistakes were mainly his. In retrospect, it is clear his messaging was too "high end". Too much of the "growth and jobs" mantra was about innovation and the new economy. He should have addressed a great deal better the worries and futures of those in the old economy.

The Liberal conservatives believe there should have been more on boats – which actually were talked about quite a lot – and national security. They wanted a strongly negative campaign.

The conservatives haven't established, however, that if their sort of campaign had been run, the result would have been better. Would it have done anything to prevent, for example, the fall of three seats in Tasmania, where people had very basic issues and Labor's "Mediscare" resonated?

Specifically, the conservatives have not established that if Tony Abbott had been left in place, the Coalition would have done as well, let alone better, at the election. Very likely it would have done worse.

The unfortunate conclusion may be that we are just talking about two flawed Liberal leaders.

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But now the conservatives are trying to use the moment of Turnbull's weakness to stand on his neck with a series of demands, including a greater role for one of their number, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, promotion of more conservatives, and changes to the superannuation policy. It was reported at the weekend that Turnbull "is reaching out to conservative Liberals ... offering an enhanced role for Peter Dutton in leadership strategy and preparing to promote a new generation of right-wing MPs".

It is worth remembering a couple of points. The Coalition nearly lost to Labor, which is on its left. If Turnbull panders too much to the conservatives – to whom he gave ground in the process of becoming leader – he will alienate many ordinary centrist voters.

The Coalition also lost votes (as did Labor) to the likes of Xenophon and One Nation, but these are populist groups, rather than representing "conservatism" in the form the Liberal right does. The danger here is that these groups will be able to extract money from the government in return for concessions, when Australia's AAA credit rating is at risk.

Obviously Turnbull will have an eye out to his right. But he should not be fooled into thinking the conservatives' loud voices and big demands – backed by their media spruikers – mean they have more support than they actually do.

Turnbull indicated on Sunday that people should not expect many changes in his frontbench. There will be some promotions, because of election losses. They should be driven by merit rather than faction.

Turnbull can point out that he only did a reshuffle a few months ago and therefore not many changes are required. But (he will hope) this will be the last shuffle for a good while so he should use the opportunity to get things right.

The future of Health Minister Sussan Ley is a matter of speculation, with debate about her performance in the campaign. Was she kept under wraps or did she keep herself under wraps? No doubt the former.

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The fact that Ley wasn't thrown into the fray is being explained as the Coalition not wanting to put the spotlight on health, an area of traditional strength for Labor. But in those last weeks when "Mediscare" was obviously biting, the government desperately needed a very strong health voice out there – not just the voices of Turnbull, Morrison and the like.

Just as in 2003 John Howard, with Medicare a political problem, gave Tony Abbott the job of neutralising it, so Turnbull, having talked up his desire to show the Coalition is committed to Medicare, should use the opportunity for a fresh ministerial start in health.

The importance of getting someone who is able to carry the argument is all the greater because the government can't afford the money Howard gave Abbott. Josh Frydenberg, who has in recent months done a lot of the government's heavy lifting work in the media, would be a good choice, with Ley being found another cabinet spot.

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