

## Grattan on Friday: A year in, we don't yet know what Turnbull wants to do with the job

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

A year next Wednesday since the coup that installed Malcolm Turnbull, many Liberals are disappointed and surprised he has turned out, so far, a mediocre prime minister. Others, with their leopard-and-spots analysis, feel vindicated.

“The Liberal Party always had to have its Malcolm Turnbull experiment,” says one who voted for the change last September, adding wryly “it’s had two”. He observes disconsolately, “we’re back to where we started” before the switch.

Well, not quite. The Turnbull “experiment”, driven primarily by fear the Coalition would lose the election, delivered the win that, on the evidence, would have eluded Tony Abbott. But it was victory by a sliver.

Moreover, there is little signature policy to show for Turnbull’s first 12 months. And he’s yet to answer the fundamental question: what does he want to do with the job?

Twice now, Turnbull has glittered more appealingly as aspirant than occupant of his party’s leadership. He did learn from his failures in opposition. But he has still not mastered the intricate skillset that successful leadership requires, especially when it is the prime ministership.

The man who prides himself on technological connectivity struggles to connect with his human constituencies – voters and party. Peta Credlin’s tag, Mr Harbourside Mansion, cuts to the core. The election campaign revealed his awkwardness on the streets and in the trenches. Compare his natural ease when he hit this year’s international summit season.

Turnbull is shocked at the suggestion people aren’t riveted by his innovation agenda. Former Liberal MP Ewen Jones puts his finger on the Turnbull mindset: “He sees where success can be, everywhere he turns. He’s trying to make people look up to the brightest future.”

Jones remains a fan of Turnbull’s optimism despite the election costing him his north Queensland seat of Herbert. But Turnbull’s “most exciting time” mantra – which even he now

## Grattan on Friday: A year in, we don't yet know what Turnbull wants to do with the job

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

sends up – doesn't resonate with a lot of workers surrounded by more uncertainty than opportunity in the transitioning economy.

To many in his party's rank and file Turnbull is an atypical Liberal. Conservatives remain suspicious of him; progressives are disillusioned. "He doesn't understand the party," says a Liberal elder. "He doesn't have the backing of the party."

The Liberal Party didn't make Turnbull; he made himself, then barged in.

Turnbull, like Kevin Rudd before him, leads as a loner. He promised to restore cabinet government and he does consult. But he lacks long-standing, rusted-on "mates" among colleagues who'd tell him what he doesn't want to hear – although Julie Bishop is said to give some blunt advice.

Key ministerial supporters such as Christopher Pyne and George Brandis are loyalists of convenience who previously waved the Abbott flag, after being strong backers of Turnbull as opposition leader. His relationship with Treasurer Scott Morrison remains uneasy, though better than a few months ago.

In 2009 Turnbull lost his leadership partly because he stood his ground on a policy principle; in 2015 he put power first, giving assurances as he sought votes for the leadership that he'd stick to Abbott's policies on climate and the marriage plebiscite. The undertakings, later formalised in an agreement with the Nationals, served their purpose but at the cost of confusing the public about what Turnbull stands for.

He struggles in adversity, anger on display, firing bullets of blame. His graceless election night address was appalling. After the census meltdown he declared heads would roll. When demonstrators interrupted his economic speech, Turnbull didn't just ask the police for a report, but also the function's organisers.

He was understandably furious at the ministers who missed parliamentary divisions, but did he have to say they had been "humiliated" and "excoriated"? He's berated business figures at

private social occasions for not spruiking for the government.

Turnbull entered office with sky-high popularity and bubbling confidence. He threw open the issue of tax reform with everything “on the table”, which soon generated the expectation of major change. It looked like a refreshing policy approach. But as the debate dragged on, the critique turned.

Internally, Turnbull's signals were not always clear to ministers, especially Morrison, who thought he had a licence to freelance. It became obvious Turnbull had too much air in the balloon.

What emerged was much less ambitious: the budget contained a plan to cut company tax over a decade, modest income tax relief to prevent middle earners being hit by bracket creep, and the paring back of superannuation concessions. The first was not voter-friendly and almost certainly won't survive the Senate in its current form; the last upset Liberal donors and triggered a backbench revolt.

In November Turnbull had a satisfaction rating of plus 38. Now he begins his second term with lower net approval than any prime minister in the past 40 years at a similar point, according to an analysis by polling expert John Stirton. In the first Newspoll since the election, Turnbull's net satisfaction was minus 18. This compares with Malcolm Fraser's first poll after the 1977 election of plus 19; Bob Hawke (post-1984) plus 41; Paul Keating (1993) minus nine; John Howard (1998) plus 12; and Julia Gillard (2010) plus ten.

The comparison is not exact, because of the timing of some of the earlier polls, but the general picture is clear.

Turnbull faces a major battle to re-establish himself with an electorate that is more sullen than ever. He has to acquire an ear for the ordinary voter, manage an assertive party, counter a savvy and ruthless opposition leader and, most important, stack up some solid policy achievements quickly.

## Grattan on Friday: A year in, we don't yet know what Turnbull wants to do with the job

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

He must resist being spooked by the Liberal right and the dark shadow of a deeply unforgiving Abbott. Without a credible alternative Turnbull's leadership seems safe, but Liberal opinion is nevertheless divided on whether he'll be at the helm come the next election.

The policy challenge is complicated by the difficult Senate, yet to be tested. Calling a double-dissolution election produced a non-Green crossbench of 11. Turnbull has responded to criticism of his decision by saying if the election had been for half the Senate, most of the previous eight crossbenchers would not have faced the people and "we could have reasonably expected another six crossbenchers elected". Maybe, but not four Hansonites.

How ironic: Turnbull is forced into a charm offensive to court Pauline Hanson some two decades after John Howard was flayed for being too soft on her.

Recognising the tough times ahead in delivering results this term, Turnbull has made changes in his office to strengthen his hand. Senior staffer David Bold oversees a group that will liaise with the crossbench and the backbench. Mathias Cormann's former chief-of-staff, Simon Atkinson, has been appointed policy tsar to co-ordinate and advise across the board.

These are sensible moves. But in the end, the issue is whether Turnbull himself is up to what's required.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-a-year-in-we-dont-yet-know-what-turnbull-wants-to-do-with-the-job-65122>