

Turnbull beats Abbott with promise of party reform but what can he deliver?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Malcolm Turnbull and Mike Baird triumphed over Tony Abbott at the NSW Liberals' weekend meeting but it remains to be seen whether their initiative for broad reform will lead to meaningful democratisation of the faction-ridden NSW party after a proposed convention next year.

The NSW division has an entrenched bad culture, among both right and left, and going back as far as anyone can remember. It will be harder to break than a smoker's addiction.

Turnbull had the numbers but also the political necessity to win on Saturday. This had turned into a Turnbull versus Abbott fight; especially after last week's gun debacle, it was imperative he asserted his authority in the party.

Abbott, with a motion from his local Warringah federal electorate conference, advocated a move to preselection plebiscites, but this was voted down after the broader motion – for which Abbott also voted – was carried. Abbott persisted with his motion despite it being doomed following the earlier vote.

Rank and file preselections were recommended (with safeguards) in a review of the NSW party chaired by John Howard. Plebiscites are the obvious “democratic” way for the party to choose candidates. In terms of outcomes they would favour the right faction - with the consequences that would bring in terms of the complexion of candidates chosen.

The present indirect system of choosing candidates in NSW is both less democratic and has allowed lobbyists to gain a great deal of power in the NSW preselection process. It works to the advantage of moderate candidates.

The moderates, who with the centre-right group control the NSW division, don't want to go down the “democratic” route because their power would be eroded.

There is no obvious reason why they would change their mind between now and when the matter is considered again next year. Those with the power will want to hang on to it, or as

much of it as they can.

Former state president Trent Zimmerman, a leading moderate, said on Sunday that the concern with plebiscites was that they could re-open branch stacking. (It might be noted in passing that when it comes to stacking, Turnbull was up with the best of them when he turned his eyes to ousting the sitting Liberal in Wentworth.)

Zimmerman, speaking on Sky, could only think of arguments against plebiscites. The party's members had been divided about them when surveyed a while ago, he said. The present system was working just fine – look at the candidates it had produced. To avoid stacking there would have to be safeguards - an “activity test” had been mentioned. Even the proposed requirement of two years' membership for voting mightn't be enough, he said. What was needed was a plan that “goes beyond preselection”.

As part of the Turnbull-Baird plan the NSW Liberals will be discussing how to get more members into the party, bring more women to the fore, and give members a greater sense of involvement.

The trouble with parties attempting to attract membership is that at best we're talking about very limited numbers. Few people want to join parties these days, and those who do tend disproportionately to be at the extremes.

Even apart from the challenge of persuading people to sign up to parties in general, can anyone see large numbers of ordinary people flocking to the rancorous ranks of the NSW Liberal Party, or the closed shop that is the Victorian ALP?

It's the true believers who are the modern joiners, and their beliefs are often well removed from the more centrist politics of most voters. This is one reason why the decision to give the ALP rank and file a 50% say in choosing the leader could become problematic in the long run.

Turnbull told Saturday's state council that the party needed to rebuild its membership to the size it was decades ago. Forty years ago in NSW it was six or seven size as big as now, he said.

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“We can do it again by engagement, by reaching out, by ensuring that every member, every person who ... wants to be part of our party ... knows that they will have a say. Their voice will be respected, their voice will be heard,” he said.

“We must modernise our organisation, ensuring greater grassroots partnership and involvement. This includes critically the selection of parliamentary candidates and, importantly, strengthening the capacity of members to contribute to policy.”

To which one can only say “Good luck with that, Malcolm”. If the Prime Minister is serious about reform it won't be easy. He'll have Abbott on his tail, pushing from behind, and his NSW factional allies poised in front, anxious to contain the march forward. If he is not serious, he will have to find a way of sidestepping when another day of judgement comes next year.

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