

How changing times made Australia's political leaders more disposable

Written by Rodney Tiffen, Emeritus Professor, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney



Malcolm Turnbull on the day he deposed Tony Abbott as Liberal Party leader in September 2015. AAP/Sam Mooy

Politics in 1950s Adelaide was a gentlemanly affair. The premier, Thomas Playford, and Labor's Mick O'Halloran faced each other in four election campaigns between 1950 and 1959. More surprisingly, they dined together each week to discuss Playford's future plans for South Australia, and often praised each other publicly.

O'Halloran remained Labor leader until he died in 1960. Playford wept openly when told of the death, and was a pallbearer and speaker at O'Halloran's state funeral.

To contemporary eyes it is not surprising that the victorious Playford – the longest-serving party leader in postwar Australian history – remained leader, but more unusual that O'Halloran also remained leader without serious challenge through four losing elections.

In the decades after the second world war, losing an election was not necessarily grounds for a leader being replaced or challenged. Federal Labor leaders Bert Evatt and Arthur Calwell and Victorians Clive Stoneham and Clyde Holding all lost three successive elections while remaining in place. In contrast, only one party leader since the 1980s (Rob Borbidge, Queensland Nationals) has survived to suffer three or more electoral defeats.

Until at least the 1970s, the major route to party leadership was through seniority, and patience was considered a virtue. When Harold Holt became prime minister in 1966, he [proudly told his wife](#) :

I climbed over no-one's dead body to get here.

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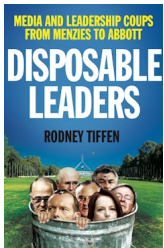
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In Western Australia, Charles Court “desperately” wanted to be premier, but he was “unbelievably patient”, waiting until his long-reigning predecessor, David Brand, retired for health reasons.

Brand’s successor as premier, Labor’s John Tonkin, did not become leader until he was 63, having been deputy for 15 years, and then became premier when aged 69. Some of his junior colleagues suggested he might step down for someone younger, but he neatly deflected them, and open challenge did not occur to them.

The emphasis on seniority and patience had its costs. It denied some of the most able people their chance to lead.

Leadership is increasingly temporary



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The way times have changed is exemplified in the frequency of party coups against sitting prime ministers.

Robert Menzies was the first prime minister to be overthrown by his own party, in 1941. It was another 30 years before it happened again – when John Gorton fell in March 1971 – and then 20 years until Paul Keating defeated Bob Hawke in December 1991.

So, in the century up to 2010, three sitting prime ministers were victims of party coups. Then, in just five years, three more followed – Kevin Rudd was defeated by Julia Gillard in June 2010; Rudd then [defeated Gillard](#) to resume the prime ministership three years later, in June 2013; and most recently Malcolm Turnbull [defeated](#) Tony Abbott, in September 2015.

The pace and pressure of contemporary society is one reason for the greater turnover of

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leaders. Of the 17 postwar leaders who led their party continuously for 12 years or more, ten became leader in 1960 or before, and only three (Bob Carr, Mike Rann and John Howard) became leader after 1980.

The fact that leadership has become more precarious and conditional is starkly confirmed by trends in length of tenure. Those who became party leader before 1970 averaged eight years and six months in the role, while those who became leader from 1970 on averaged just under half that: four years exactly.

Similarly, those who became leader before 1970 fought 3.0 elections, on average. Those from 1970 on averaged just 1.2 elections as leader. Some states have moved from a three-year to a four-year election cycle, but that is only a very small part of the explanation.

The more temporary nature of party leadership is clear from these figures, but they only start to capture the greater ruthlessness. A successful leader can still lead the party to several elections, but an unsuccessful (or not likely to be successful) leader is much more quickly disposed of.

In recent decades, fewer than three in ten losing leaders led their party into the next election, in contrast to six in ten in the 1950s and 1960s.

Challenges became increasingly pre-emptive: among those who became leader from 1990 onwards, one-quarter (20 of 78) were ousted by their colleagues before they had fought a single election.

Of the 55 post-war leaders who became leader before 1970, their leaderships finished predominantly for personal rather than political reasons. Almost one in five (ten) actually died in the role, the last such death being Queensland Country Party Premier Jack Pizzey in 1968, the second-last being Harold Holt, who drowned the previous December.

If we combine those dying in office, those who retired as a result of old age, those who resigned because of a medical reason or for personal reasons, the total is 55 per cent of all the pre-1970

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leaders. Since then, all those reasons combined account for just 10% of leaders' departures.

The rise of partyroom coups

The reasons for leaderships ending in recent decades are much more political. 30% resigned either after an election loss or because of poor electoral prospects, compared with 15% of the earlier group, while almost half were forcibly displaced by their own party.

Of leaders whose tenure began after 1970 and finished by 2016, almost half (68 out of 138) were victims of party coups. It has become the single most-common means by which leaderships end.

Taking just the two major parties at federal and state level (plus the Queensland Nationals, which were the major party in that state), there were no successful leadership challenges in the 1960s. But since 1970, there have been fully 73, and the rate has been accelerating. In the 17 years of this century there have already been 32.

The increasing frequency of leadership coups has not made them any less disruptive. In process, they are often fraught by uncertainty and crisis and sometimes these, the most personal of political conflicts, produce enduring legacies of bitterness and internal division.

Despite having their roots in parties' greater electoral pragmatism, the majority are followed by electoral failure rather than success.

This is an edited extract from [Disposable Leaders: Media and Leadership Coups from Menzies to Abbott](#), published by Newsouth Books.

Rodney Tiffen 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.

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