

Grattan on Friday: It's a year since Turnbull won his first election, but what about a second?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



Malcolm Turnbull broke out his leather jacket this week and tried to shrug off the tensions consuming his party. Jennifer Rajca/AAP

An admission. When I heard people raising the “transaction costs” after Tony Abbott was deposed by Malcolm Turnbull, I thought they were exaggerating. Surely these couldn’t be too high, given the relative popularity levels of the two.

Nearly two years on, when the Coalition is lagging badly in the polls and many Liberals – albeit way out from an election – already see opposition looming, those costs are there in spades, in the form of a deeply vengeful Abbott, bent on wrecking his successor; a party at war internally, and speculation being fanned about whether its leader will last to the election.

It’s just a year on Sunday since Turnbull narrowly won the election, but the fear of defeat is strong.

Former Queensland premier Campbell Newman, who spectacularly lost office in one term from a massive majority, has a credibility problem in commenting on what leaders should do. Nevertheless, his call this week for Turnbull to stand down is just another unhelpful piece of flotsam for the Liberals.

“He can’t be deposed – we can’t have another execution,” Newman said. But Turnbull was “dividing the Liberal Party”, what he’d tried wasn’t working, and he should “do the right thing” and quit.

Like most other people in the community, politicians are more impatient than they used to be. So parties are even less willing than once to contemplate losing office.

A period out of power would be painful, no question. The Liberals would soul-search to define

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the identity of the party they wanted to go into the 2020s.

A new generation would take over, replacing top players of the last decade – Turnbull, Abbott and Julie Bishop. The Nationals might possibly break out of a coalition relationship with the Liberals.

For a Liberal Party that thinks office is its natural home, this would be like facing a nasty spell in hospital to repair severely broken bones. One comfort, perhaps, would be that the febrile nature of today's politics means government is never too far away. Kevin Rudd won handsomely in 2007; Abbott almost became prime minister at the following election. Abbott swept into power in 2013; Turnbull nearly lost in 2016.

As this year ebbs away, Turnbull's hold on the leadership will become more precarious if there is no lift in those relentless Newspolls.

But a problem for the party and an insurance for Turnbull is that of the possible alternatives – Bishop, Peter Dutton, Scott Morrison, a resurrected Abbott – there is no one who'd obviously do any better. And given that we may be talking about "saving the furniture", like Rudd did in 2013, who would want to be the one to lead to a loss?

Just say Turnbull, facing a rout, did decide (much later) to do what Newman says he should do now. Who'd benefit by getting a poisoned chalice?

Bishop? To end a sparkling career by leading to a likely defeat?

Dutton? In recent times, especially since Morrison's sheen disappeared, Dutton has been talked up as a future leader. But lose an election, perhaps in a landslide, and it would be hard to hang onto the leadership in opposition.

The same applies to Morrison, even if he could get the party room numbers.

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That leaves Abbott. Peta Credlin, his confidant and former chief-of-staff, said this week he “actually doesn’t want the job of prime minister”. Unlikely as this seems, that assessment is corroborated by another source.

The thing about Abbott, however, is that he can take one view one day and the opposite the next. If there was half a chance to put on the boxing gloves, he wouldn’t care too much about facing defeat. He’d feel vindicated, and relish the fight.

Don’t lay any money on such a scenario. It’s just one of many long shots in an unfolding story.

Meanwhile, Abbott is said to be in good spirits, as he’s been a centre of attention this week, with a speech articulating his broad agenda, followed by one calling for Australia to consider acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

Once again, as is his wont, he went back on a position he took in government. “Not more robustly challenging the nuclear no-go mindset is probably the biggest regret I have from my time as PM,” he said.

The submarine speech saw him wading into the portfolio of Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne, who has had a nightmare week.

As the dust settles, one legacy question will be how much damage Pyne has done himself with his foolish boasting about the moderates’ power and the prospects for the earlier-than-expected delivery of same-sex marriage – comments which, when leaked, sparked such a damaging furore.

Pyne traditionally has had a heavy coating of teflon. His ministerial performance during this government has been lacklustre: in education, he failed to deliver his tertiary package; he was in and out of the innovation job in a flash, and the most talked-about feature of his period so far in his present post has been his covetous eye on the Defence job held by fellow moderate Marise Payne.

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As he said in last Friday's speech to the "Black Hand" moderates' function, he's always voted for Turnbull. But he managed to crack Abbott's inner circle, before climbing on board with the Turnbull coup.

Pyne's ambition is the deputy leadership – which would allow him to move into foreign affairs.

Before this week, he might have thought himself well placed, for example, to be deputy to Dutton in opposition. Now he has suffered a lot of reputational damage. But he has considerable powers of regeneration, and the thickest of skins. When some years ago he was featured in a Good Weekend profile with the cover asking "Is this the most annoying man in Australia?", he was reportedly delighted.

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.

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