

If the Liberals have any hope of rebuilding, they might take lessons from Robert Menzies

Written by James Walter, Professor of Political Science, Monash University

After the hatred, theatre and gore of a party insurgency, the third act in the Coalition's mind-numbing term in government is about to begin. The self-nominated defenders of the Liberal faith have destroyed their target — the infidel Malcolm Turnbull — but at ruinous cost to themselves. Can the Liberal Party recover?

Malcolm Turnbull's fate was always predictable. The party's fatal flaw was manifest in his ascension. Tony Abbott equated the narrow preoccupations of some in the party's thinning ranks with broader opinion. Following their preferences, he lost the public.

Turnbull, speaking for a more open constituency, garnered popularity and electoral credibility: this was the capital he used to bring down Abbott. But he had made a pact with party conservatives to win their grudging support. Whenever he attempted to do what he had promised the people, they closed down his options. He appeared incrementally to sacrifice all he had promised. Inevitably, adverse polls reflected the government's failure to do what Turnbull had offered. Coalition support stayed stubbornly low (though with recent signs of improvement); still, Turnbull remained preferred prime minister.

Read more: [**How the hard right terminated Turnbull, only to see Scott Morrison become PM**](#)

Then, with his electoral appeal diminished again after the adverse results of the Longman byelection, they turned on him. Now, all bets were off. He determined the circumstances and timing of the final meeting that would determine his end, exposing the right's machinations. His run was over, but his tactics demolished the insurgents' plans, and Turnbull's choice – Morrison – took the prize.

Despite having seen off Peter Dutton with his urgers and acolytes, ameliorating the wounds inflicted on the reasonable centre, the Liberal Party remains hopelessly divided. The right, with its obsessions at odds with majority party and public opinion, has been punished, but not enough. It will not go away. The bloody implosion of last week is as catastrophic for the Liberals

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as was the [collapse of its conservative predecessor](#), the United Australia Party, in 1941.

Consider what it took to recuperate after that. Robert Menzies rightly concluded that the party had to be rebuilt from the ground up. Conflicted groups had to be unified. That involved not only organisational transformation, but [the wholesale “revival of liberalism”](#), as he termed it. Then, the new message had to be painstakingly disseminated, through press, radio and public performance. He had to create a new constituency, and one responsive to the progressive tenor of the time. The result was the born-again Liberal Party. It took him eight years, and defeat in two elections.

Consider then what has changed in near 70 years since [Menzies’ 1949 victory](#). The age of the mass party is over. The mass media, too, has been revolutionised. Menzies instilled the idea of a leader and a message; there was a clear purpose, but the leader-centric pragmatism he pioneered, and the means of speaking to the people and the broad church this could mobilise, saw its last invocation in John Howard. Mass support has evaporated. The possibility of tightly controlling the message through consolidated media and predictable cycles that even Howard could utilise has gone.

Liberal momentum cannot be sustained by a tiny branch membership. Howard never forgot the base — he travelled and talked to it constantly, not only listening, but persuading. But that was never enough: he had also to persuade the “mainstream”, identifying all those whose votes he might win who would never join the party. And Howard, like Menzies, was a master of mass communication. Yet, he was at sea when it came to the challenges of technological diversity, social media and the perversity of aggregating opinion not through party channels, or shock-jock mates on radio, but via internet-mediated algorithms.

Healing divisions within a tottering edifice won't be enough. The party is not fit for purpose. There is no agenda for the country. It is unable to manage internal opinion, mobilise the public and maintain discipline, let alone sustain government.

Read more: [Turnbull's problem was that he was a politician for another era](#)

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But if there is to be any hope, it now needs a leader with four capacities:

First, Menzies' willingness to rebuild from the ground up: will the tribal factions tolerate that?

Second, the wit to revive a form of liberalism for these times, attuned not to "the base" alone, but to a public with wider interests, which must now be reached through multiple, web-mediated channels.

Third, recognition of the complexities of providing what the public has clearly shown it wants. An energy policy, for instance, that acknowledges the imperatives of price reduction and climate change, and can harmonise both.

And fourth, an acknowledgement that such policies demand the orchestration of many hands, much advice and diverse talents: they will founder if Morrison defaults to "strong leadership", or the inner circles of true believers.

Finally, resolving the big issues – economic reform, immigration, social cohesion – has always entailed a degree of bipartisanship, of consensus across the aisle. The partisan intensification of recent years we now see is intra-party, not just inter-party.

If allowed to fester, it will confound all attempts to address the challenges we face.

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