

Political leadership cannot be disentangled from collective psychology

Written by Andrew Frain, Teaching Fellow, Strategic Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Australian National University

Much has been made recently of the revenge motives of Tony Abbott, and the seemingly self-defeating choices of the Liberal Party room in changing our prime minister from [Malcolm Turnbull to Scott Morrison](#).

While these may be partially true, such narratives are a distraction from what's really at the heart of events like Turnbull's fall from office: intergroup dynamics.

Research into collective psychology helps us understand the forceful resistance to Turnbull as leader, and why the Liberal Party reaction in some ways has been perfectly rational.

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

The importance of collective psychology

Journalist Annabel Crabb's recent [analysis](#) points out that Turnbull's lack of acceptance by the conservative wing of the Liberal Party of Australia was his undoing.

Her interpretation was that the conservatives succumbed to irrational fear; that a better approach may have seen Abbott and his colleagues appreciate the concessions that Turnbull made (such as shifting policy on the [National Energy Guarantee](#)), look past superficial differences, and bury the hatchet.

Read more: [*Malcolm Turnbull shelves emissions reduction target as leadership speculation mounts*](#)

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Such analyses are fed by the common belief that individual realities and individual motivations primarily drive actions. The truth is the opposite: collective psychology is central to who we are, and powerfully influences motivation.

It starts with basic cognitive psychology – humans need to translate the things we encounter into concepts. We do this through a process called [cognitive categorisation](#).

Put simply, we class things together, and contrast those things with other things. Whatever it is – whether chairs, tables, pens, or cars – the way we understand the world is by constructing cognitive categories.

The field of collective psychology takes this further, and shows how cognitive categories are also the way we understand people – including [ourselves](#).

If we want to understand who we are, then we categorise ourselves. Sometimes that's as unique individuals ("I" contrasted with "others"), while at other times it's as members of social groups ("us" contrasted with "them").

Leadership and social identities

Obvious examples of inclusive cognitive categories include sporting teams, nationalities, fandoms, and occupations. Cognitive categories of this type are termed [social identities](#).

There is growing evidence that social identities are key to [organisational commitment](#), [influence](#), [charisma](#), and [trust](#). And that understanding social identities is a core characteristic of leadership.

Social psychologists have long argued that human motivation needs to be understood [in light of social identities](#)

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Yes, sometimes we are motivated by self-interest, seeking to do better for ourselves as individuals. Other times, however, we are motivated by collective interest: first and foremost, we care about our group.

Social identities in politics

The subgroups of an organisation, not the organisation itself, [are often](#) what is most important to people. Abbott, Dutton, and their allies are members of the conservative wing of the Liberal Party. This wing has a passionate membership, and has values and beliefs that it holds dear.

Who is Turnbull to this audience? Turnbull is the person who plucked the mantle of prime minister from its champion of the conservative movement. Turnbull reduced the government majority [to a sliver](#). Turnbull enthusiastically oversaw the [legislation of gay marriage](#) and has [well-known sympathy](#) for climate change concerns.

Yes, when the 2018 spill happened the Liberal Party was in power, and might have won the next election. However, under continued Turnbull leadership, what prospects were there for growing conservative influence?

If the Liberal Party was to win the next election under Turnbull, this might serve to legitimise the moderate take on the party. Better perhaps to take the reins, loose the next election, but have the platform to reinvigorate the conservative movement across Australia.

Overall, there are legitimate explanations to see Turnbull as an outsider who would not advance the values of those he sought to lead. But we can only appreciate these as legitimate if we recognise the reality of social identities.

It's social identities – here, a strong sense of “we conservatives” – that make it logical to face

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immediate personal hardship for the sake of a longer term collective goal.

Read more: [Grattan on Friday: The high costs of our destructive coup culture](#)

Ignore collective psychology at your peril

In time, a dominant description of events will emerge. Many now talk of recent events as if a soap opera.

We hear of the [retribution](#) motives of Abbott, the [cunning](#) of Turnbull, and the [jostling and scheming](#) of the party room. And that maybe Morrison [knew what he was doing all along](#).

These are stories of individuals pursuing individual ends, responding to base individual urges – an idea summarised well by [Barnaby Joyce](#) :

Do you think that human nature has changed that much? It's called ambition. It's called ego. It's how it works.

Possibly, but these perspectives are also convenient. They are convenient because they allow unsympathetic voices to deny, as much to themselves as anyone else, that the conservative movement is a sincere, coordinated, and powerful force in Australian politics.

Why can we indulge in this denial? In part, it's because collective psychology isn't sufficiently respected. It's taken as optional; we can accept or ignore its presence to our heart's content.

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That denial blinkers us severely. Without it, we can't properly understand, and anticipate, the commitment to a cause that humans are capable of.

The conservative wing may burn the Liberal Party to the ground if it's no longer a vehicle for success. How the social identities of the Liberal Party [are managed](#) will determine whether that occurs or not.

[Brigadier Nicholas Jans \(Ret’d\) OAM, PhD](#) contributed to writing this article.

Andrew Frain is affiliated with the Australian Greens political party.

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