

Sometimes birthdays are best let pass quietly. The Liberals are finding the 75th anniversary of their founding another occasion for the blood sport they thought they'd put behind them.

Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull are out of parliament – for which Scott Morrison is much thankful – but their passions are unabated. Each has let fly in interviews with The Australian's Troy Bramston to mark the anniversary.

[Abbott repeated](#) that it was Turnbull's undermining which did him in (only the partial truth) and indicated he wouldn't mind returning to parliament but didn't think the Liberal party would ask him (absolutely true).

[Turnbull's was the more pertinent](#) and, from where the government stands, pointed interview because it fed very directly into central issues of the moment, climate change and energy policy.

"The Liberal Party has just proved itself incapable of dealing with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in any sort of systematic way," Turnbull said.

"The consequence ... is without question that we are paying higher prices for electricity and having higher emissions."

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He knows what he's talking about. These issues were critical (though not the only factor) in Turnbull losing the leadership twice - first in opposition and then in government. And that was

despite doing deals and trade offs to try to satisfy the right in his party.

He still frets about the battles which cost him so much for so little gain. He told the Australian, amid boasts about what his government had done, that his biggest regret as PM was not settling a new energy policy.

What Scott Morrison really thinks on the climate challenge, or what he would do if he were just driven by policy concerns without regard to party considerations or electoral judgements are in that category of known unknowns.

In few areas can Morrison's beliefs be divined free of political context.

But we do know two things.

Firstly, we don't have a satisfactory energy policy: emissions are rising; power prices are too high; investment is being discouraged. An [analysis released](#) by the Grattan Institute this week was damning about how federal government policies were discouraging investment including by "bashing big companies" (the so-called "big stick" legislation, allowing for divestment when an energy company is recalcitrant, is still before parliament).

Secondly, climate change is again resonating strongly in the community.

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Critics dismiss the attention young activist Greta Thunberg has received internationally, and this

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week's "Extinction Rebellion" demonstrations, and many in the government would point to the election result to note that climate change did not carry the day with the "quiet Australians".

The Morrison win, however, doesn't mean the issue lacks cut through, or won't have potency in the future. And although the Liberals like to talk about the miracle victory, it should be remembered the win was by a sliver, not by 30 seats. What made it so notable was that it defied expectations.

Turnbull said in his interview the Liberal party had been influenced by a group that was denialist and reactionary on climate change.

It still is, but this group is not giving trouble at the moment because Morrison, unlike his predecessor, is not provoking them.

The problem for Morrison is that keeping his party calm doesn't solve the policy problem. Unless that is more effectively tackled, it could come back to bite him, regardless of the positive tale he tries to spin, such as [in his United Nations speech](#).

Turnbull also said in his interview that, among much else, in government he had been "very focused on innovation" which, as we remember, was his catch cry in his early days as PM.

And, if we take [information from the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for International Development](#), reported in [Tuesday's Australian Financial Review](#), Australia needs innovation to be a much higher priority.

Australia fell from 57th to 93rd between 1995 and 2017 on the index of economic complexity, which measures the diversity and sophistication of countries' exports. Our wealth comes from the minerals and energy that form the bulk of our exports but "Australia is less complex than expected for its income level. As a result, its economy is projected to grow slowly. The Growth Lab's 2027 Growth Projections foresee growth in Australia of 2.2% annually over the coming decade, ranking in the bottom half of countries globally," the data says.

“Economic growth is driven by diversification into new products that are incrementally more complex. ... [Australia](#) has diversified into too few products to contribute to substantial income growth.”

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Turnbull’s talk of innovation, agility, and the like was seen by many in his ranks, particularly in hindsight, as too high falutin’. It certainly went down badly in regional areas, which is why in 2016 the Nationals sharply differentiated themselves in the election campaign.

The Harvard work suggests Turnbull’s innovation ambition was on the right track. But the political evidence showed he was a bad salesman for this (and a lot else).

Morrison is a good marketing man. But the test of his prime ministership will be whether he can use his marketing skills to sell policies that the country needs, rather just what he thinks will go over easily with his constituency.

The most effective leaders (and that excludes both Abbott and Turnbull) can both identify what the nation requires and persuade enough of the voters to embrace it, even when it’s difficult. They operate not on the principle of the lowest common electoral denominator, or simplistic descriptions of their supporters - rather they pursue the highest achievable goals.

*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 their academic appointment.*

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## View from The Hill: Malcolm Turnbull delivers the unpalatable truth to Scott Morrison on climate and energy

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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