

Sodding the Australian Voter: Accidental Prime Ministers and Political Indulgence

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*It is a continuation of **Malcolm Turnbull** by other means. The new Prime Minister of Australia, **Scott Morrison** and his freshly appointed Deputy, **Josh Frydenberg** have ensured that the “insurgents”, as Turnbull deemed them, did not come through. Both were respective architects – failed ones at that – of the company tax plan, voted down in the Senate, and the National Energy Guarantee, torn up by the Liberal Party room. Both claim that this was a “new generation” of leadership. These claims were extraordinary in their repudiation of reality.*

Turnbull, who has promised a swift exit from federal politics, was never a comfortable fit with the Liberal Party. He was never counted amongst them.

“It was, and always has been,” [observed Annabel Crabb](#), “the inability of the party to accept collectively that Malcolm Bligh Turnbull is one of them.”

He did not drink from the same watering holes, nor dine at the same venues with hack and operator. And he had more than flirted with the big power stalwarts of the enemy: the Labor Party.

Turnbull started with a bruising entry into federal politics, [overthrowing](#) incumbent MP **Peter King** in the seat of Wentworth in the 2004 pre-selection process. He was a beast who terrified the Liberal party apparatchiks. Through the course of his political stint, he was keen in a field deemed toxic by his colleagues: climate change. Never the party man, never true blue, and only reluctantly pro-coal. He called in the consultants, the experts, the various figures who would give him options. But in politics, numerous options can be fatal to the vision; certitude demands distillation.

On the ABC, Crabb seemed to worship Turnbull’s multitasking, merchant banker-barrister brain as it was making its exit from Parliament. In conversation with fellow journalist **Andrew Probyn**, both reflected on his achievements as the figure who was a creaky politician but could still doodle on his phone and master the agenda of a meeting while reading an article on Roman architecture. They admired his doggerel as a student, which sounded awfully like a steal from Rudyard Kipling. (Lawyers can be such frightful plagiarists.)

None of the individuals who found themselves in the leadership roles had articulated any

specific vision of the country prior to entering the party room where the bloodletting process was ceremonially affirmed. Now, a man ruthless as immigration minister ("[Stop the Boats](#)" was Morrison's crude sloganeering contribution that served to show the Australian voter that he would be remorseless about irregular arrivals), and blustering as treasurer, has become the accidental prime minister.

The media circus has also been high up on the detail, a reminder about how closely tied the scribblers and talking heads are with the political establishment in this country. Journalists were beamed from the respective electorates of the various candidates armed with straw poll methods, taking snatches of opinion from the café patron, the dog walker, and, in one instance, the bowls club. Photos of the contenders were shown: few were recognised. Turnbull was being assassinated by the unknown and the anonymous.

At his [outgoing press conference](#), Turnbull got interesting after the usual platitudes. These involved references to the very policies he assisted fuelling: suspicions about race, big-end of town back-rubbing, reactionary tendencies, and ambivalence to climate change within his own party. He spoke about the greatness of Australia, and was hardly modest about that.

Then came observations about the coup within his own party, the red mist that had fogged up Parliament for an entire week.

"It was extraordinary. It was described as madness by many. I think it is difficult to describe it any other way."

It was the madness that involved supporters of challenger **Peter Dutton** and long term rival **Tony Abbott** "who chose to deliberately attack the government from within... because they wanted to bring the government down." He mentioned the influential outside forces which had also had their disruptive say in the process.

The saboteurs, in falling five votes short for their intended candidate, have gotten their comeuppance – richly deserved spoliation that will, in time, enable the opposition Labor Party to canter to victory. Turnbull bent over listening to the conservative factions, and capitulated. On capitulating, he was accused of being weak. Such village idiot navigation culminated in this week's vicious machinations, a true variant of what Kingsley Amis [described](#) as a "Sod the Public" policy.

It was violence without need, a curious attempt to achieve a false unity that, in any case, has not been achieved. These Cassius types, without the same tutored way, have been attempting to identify false lines: this was a disagreement between left and right within the party, leaving the centre to come up for air. A more simple answer is in the offing: it was a matter of personalities with oceanic gulfs between them. Old scores needed to be settled; revenge was to be exacted from the previous knifing in 2015 inflicted on then prime minister and Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott.

The divisions within the party suggest the split in the right that has proven lethal. And it was unnecessarily encouraged. Senator Mathias Cormann's [intervention](#) was vital and undertaken with "great sadness and a heavy heart" (treachery tends to be such) but premised on a capitulation to sentiment. In shifting loyalties from Turnbull to Dutton, he stood on the grass of Canberra's parliamentary lawn along with other mind changing loyalists, ministers Mitch Fifield and Michaelia Cash, suggesting that the prime minister had

lost the confidence of the party. This was highly questionable: at that point, a mere 20 signatures had been obtained to force a vote (or a spill, as its termed) on his leadership.

The damage done by backing the stalking horse of Dutton yielded a Turnbull-lite solution, when it was intended to yield Dutton, the shock jock's choice and Murdoch press punt. Morrison, Australia's first Pentecostal prime minister, will hope that evolution (or the divine) gifts him eyes in the back of his head. In the meantime, the Australian voter can sod off.

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