



Malcolm Turnbull Must Ignore The Luvvies – He Leads A Centre-Right Party

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Tony Abbott is right. Australians are sick of the revolving door of prime ministers. As Abbott said on Wednesday, there's not going to be a change in the Liberal leadership "any time soon". Liberal MPs are still too bruised by last year's leadership contest and a close-run election to contemplate either going back to Abbott, or moving to the next generation of Liberal leaders like Christian Porter or Josh Frydenberg.

So at the moment, the federal Liberal Party is what it is and Malcolm Turnbull is its leader. Given that many Australians would be hard-pressed to identify a single achievement of the PM's first year in office, other than breaking an election promise not to increase taxes on superannuation, the fact that according to the latest polling the Coalition is only four points behind Labor is no mean feat.

The question that Turnbull must deal with is the same one he confronted when he took the prime ministership. What is he prime minister for? And the question for his ministers is, "What sort of government do they want to be a part of?"

On the rare occasions when cabinet ministers have stood up to the parliamentary leadership group, it's been on the wrong things. A substantial number were quite willing to play petty politics and prevent the nomination of Kevin Rudd for secretary-general of the United Nations. Yet the Turnbull cabinet, just like the Abbott cabinet, consistently waves through higher taxes. And meekly sits on its hands while university students and cartoonists are prosecuted by government officials for insulting and offending people.

The cabinet's refusal to confront the question of freedom of speech in Australia is made all the more galling by the knowledge that three of its members have previously spoken passionately and publicly about the issue. In April last year, Julie Bishop went to the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris and delivered a moving speech about freedom of speech.

Strategy failure

According to many in the Canberra press gallery, the Labor Party and the Greens, Turnbull should move his party to the "centre", i.e. the Liberal Party should become more left-wing. The problem with this analysis is twofold.

First, Turnbull tried the "Labor-lite" strategy and it didn't work. All that Turnbull got for imposing higher taxes and refusing to cut government spending was a one-seat election victory. The strategy is rarely successful, either at the state or federal level. If the electorate wants a Labor government they'll vote for the real thing. This is a point slowly dawning on the federal Liberals, but it's not something yet understood by every state Liberal leader.

Second, because most journalists, the ALP and the Greens have very little real knowledge of the Liberals, they all tend to forget one thing: the Liberal Party, by its culture and history, is a political party of the centre-right. As much as Bill Shorten and Richard Di Natale might wish it otherwise, Malcolm Turnbull can't simply pledge his party to things like a free vote on same-sex marriage or the doubling of renewable energy targets. Or to be more precise, Turnbull could try something like that, just as he did when he supported Kevin Rudd's emissions trading scheme in 2009. And if he did he would come unstuck, exactly as he did seven years ago.

The alternative for Turnbull is to act as the centre-right leader of a centre-right political party pursuing centre-right policies. Such a course has a number of benefits. It would be good for Australia. It would also help him win the next election.

The past month has proved such an approach could work. The subjects of the political victories and the positive coverage the Coalition has enjoyed since the election are on exactly the things a centre-right government should be doing. Eliminating trade union corruption, reforming the welfare system, and ensuring electricity is cheap and reliable (especially if you live in South Australia) are not favorite topics of Radio National, but they are important.

The best way forward for Turnbull's leadership is different from the path the Australian Broadcasting Commission would like him to take – but it provides him with the best chance of



success.

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