



Letters Editorials Column 8 Obituaries Peter Hartcher Ross Gittins Jessica Irvine Chart Watch View from the !

Home / Comment

COMMENT JULY 1 2017

SAVE PRINT LICENSE ARTICLE

Tony Abbott: ready for round two in the fight for PM



Peter Hartcher

Show comments

SHARE TWEET MORE

The first question that onlookers ask, almost universally, is whether Tony Abbott is serious? Does he really think he can come back as prime minister?

Absolutely, is the answer. Even before Donald Trump demonstrated that anything is now possible in politics, equally improbable things have happened.



Advertisement

HUFFPOST AUSTRALIA

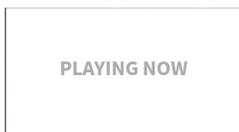
Heartbreaking Video Shows Starving ...



This Is The Healthiest Way To Browse ...



MORE NATIONAL NEWS VIDEOS



Q&A: Turnbull's fiery debate over ...



Jan Fran: 'can we not have another Prime ...



Drone spots enormous great white shark in ...



Ancient review

MOST POPULAR

- 1 Why private schools should be banned
- 2 Dastyari's shame can be Australia's gain
- 3 Dastyari is becoming Shorten's albatross – he must go
- 4 How Paul's words of wisdom helped my family
- 5 Premier, please make your stadium figures public

Q&A: Turnbull's fiery debate over indigenous recognition

With Malcolm Turnbull abandoning constitutional recognition of an Indigenous voice to parliament, audience member Teela Reid pushes Turnbull to hold a referendum on the issue.

John Howard was supposed to be unelectable yet led Australia for nearly a dozen years. Abbott was supposedly unelectable yet defeated Labor, only the seventh time that power has changed hands in Australia since World War II.

But Abbott couldn't win an election because everyone thinks he's an idiot, is the common rejoinder. Well, that's what they said about Trump. And it's what they said about Abbott the last time, too.

RELATED ARTICLES

[How same sex marriage could be Malcolm Turnbull's greatest moment](#)

[Abbott/Turnbull/Abbott leadership as bad as Rudd/Gillard/Rudd](#)

Of course, it won't be easy for him. He'd have only a handful of votes in the Liberal party room if he were to challenge Malcolm Turnbull today. And no one is counting, not formally.

In the people's hierarchy of preferred Liberal leader, there's a consistent ranking, recently borne out in an Essential Media poll – Turnbull first with 20 per cent, Julie Bishop second with 17, and Abbott on 10, followed by a gaggle of others on 2 or 3.

Advertisement

As one of the former prime minister's allies concedes, "The colleagues have seen what the bloodletting did the last time", when Turnbull brought down Abbott.

BREAKING NEWS ALERT
Get the latest news and updates emailed straight to your inbox.

Enter your email address

SIGN UP

FOLLOW SMH COMMENT

FACEBOOK

FOLLOW SMH

Get notified when the big things happen.

NEWSLETTERS



12 Amazing Gift Ideas

These 12 mind blowing products are gadgets that everyone has been buying in 2017.
The Daily Wise

By submitting your email you are agreeing to Fairfax Media's [terms and conditions](#) and [privacy policy](#).

"They wonder if it's worth it again. There's not the mood for it. At the moment."



Illustration: Dionne Gain

Abbott's multiple provocations frustrate and annoy the Prime Minister. Mightily.

One of his closest allies explains: "Lately, every night, the first story on the TV news, especially commercial TV, is about Abbott attacking Turnbull, and that's going to have an impact on perceptions of the Coalition."



Many Liberal MPs feel slighted by their Prime Minister. Photo: Andrew Meares

That, in turn, will damage Turnbull in the polls and guarantee that he fails, argues the ally. And Turnbull doesn't have a lot of leeway to start with.

Turnbull already is 47 per cent of the way to disqualifying himself from the prime ministership, according to the definition of failure that he applied to Abbott.



The Warringah motion emerged from Tony Abbott's federal electorate conference Photo: Supplied

His case for challenging his then leader rested on the fact that Abbott had "lost" 30 Newspolls in a row. Turnbull's government has now been behind in 14 consecutive Newspolls, a fortnightly drumbeat of despair.

Frustrating as Abbott's campaign may be for Turnbull, says one of his cabinet ministers, "it's certainly not distracting Malcolm – we aren't going to waste a day in government by spending it on the soap opera".

Abbott, nevertheless, has powerful motivation and he's not going to stop. He is deeply, viscerally angry. As Kevin Rudd was.

It's what happens when an elected prime minister is torn from office by colleagues, humiliated in the most public of betrayals. Both consider themselves victims of the deepest treachery.

And Abbott has suffered one more indignity than Rudd. While Julia Gillard brought her former leader into her cabinet as minister for foreign affairs, Turnbull conspicuously refuses to appoint Abbott to a cabinet post.

Abbott is further goaded by the campaign to kick him out of Parliament altogether. The NSW division of the Liberal Party is controlled by the moderates faction; Abbott is a standard-bearer for the conservatives.

A group of moderates is planning to oust Abbott from his safe northern Sydney seat of Warringah by stripping him of Liberal preselection before the next election.

A party official says, "The principle of kicking out a former PM is absolutely crazy, it would be the end of the world", a reference to its inflammatory effect on factional relations.

"But there are people countenancing it. It would just make Abbott dig in. It's the stupidest thing I've seen. It's not ethical, it's probably not even possible, and it's creating all these consequences."

A move is afoot to change the system in NSW. It didn't begin as an effort to save Abbott, but it would have that effect.

This is a proposal to allow ordinary Liberal Party members to vote in preselections. It's not a radical idea – all the other states do it already.

"Democratising" the party in this way would allow locals, not the factional apparatchiks controlled by lobbyist Michael Photios, to choose their candidates. Abbott is an avid supporter of this move; so is Turnbull. Yet its fate, to be decided at a party conference next month, is uncertain.

Stripped of the prime ministership, denied ministerial rank, threatened with the loss of his seat, Abbott, understandably, feels he has nothing to lose.

"He's a backbencher, an ex-PM, he's bloody-minded, he has nothing to lose and he's going for the full frontal assault," says a cabinet minister.

"He makes Kevin Rudd look like a wallflower."

Turnbull agrees. "Abbott's worse than Rudd because Rudd was popular enough that he could come back," he remarked to a colleague in a moment of frustration. The unloved Abbott, according to Turnbull, could not.

But all agree that Abbott is angry, and anger is a useful emotion for someone in an unhappy place. A 2001 study by US psychologists Jennifer Lerner and Dacher Keltner found that feeling angry makes people as optimistic about the outcome of a situation as feeling happy.

As *Harper's* magazine explains it: "In other words, anger may make people miserable, but it also makes them more confident and obliterates other, more introspective miseries: pain, fear, guilt, uncertainty, vulnerability. We'd rather be mad than sad."

Can the former prime minister be managed somehow? Can Turnbull negotiate with him?

"Do you negotiate with terrorists?" counterposes a key Turnbull lieutenant. "It's never enough to make concessions to conservatives."

In his earliest days as prime minister, Turnbull did try to buy Abbott off with a job.

He told him that the position of high commissioner to London, currently held by former foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer, would become available eventually. Abbott showed no interest.

Alternatively, "Turnbull could go to war with him", posits the lieutenant. He could "have a public showdown with him on same-sex

marriage and the RET [renewable energy target], but the incumbent always has more to lose."

And the extreme option of bringing on a party room spill to demonstrate superior numbers "is fraught with danger" for a leader, he adds.

Another cabinet minister wisecracks that the government could build a "rage room" in Parliament House for Abbott's private use, along the lines of a mooted outlet for angry young Muslim men in danger of radicalisation in Melbourne.

The only realistic protection the government can adopt is some self-discipline, a number of top figures concur.

"You can limit his options for attack – where we create a gap, he'll walk into it, as he did this week," when a recording of Christopher Pyne's factional self-puffery emerged on Sky News, boasting of his moderates faction being "in the winner's circle" and poised to deliver same-sex marriage despite the settled policy of the government.

"Discipline is very important," a Pyne colleague chides.

So Turnbull is otherwise helpless in the face of Abbott's determined onslaught. He will continue to batter away. But not senselessly. There is a political cunning to his campaign.

First, by speaking out consistently Abbott will indeed create the public impression of division. This will limit the government's polling prospects and fuel internal unease at the outlook under Turnbull.

Second, he's not so ambitious as to think that he can take the Kevin Rudd pathway back to the Lodge – a desperate Labor restored Rudd to the leadership because of his enduring popularity.

Unpopular Abbott doesn't expect that he'd win the widespread acclaim of the people with backbench speech-making or political snarkery.

No, he's targeting the Liberal Party's conservative base as a way of building an internal campaigning energy.

He has proposed a lengthening list of policies. All stand in conflict with those of the government. Most stand in conflict with his own policies when he was prime minister.

But, as the old adage goes, never let the facts get in the way of a good story, and Abbott certainly seems untroubled by the jarring fact that his ideas today clash with the actual policies of his government yesterday.

Abbott in power pursued the national immigration intake around the standard annual equivalent of around 1 per cent of the population. This slows the ageing of the population, contains the blowout in

federal health and aged care costs that come with ageing, and continues the historical trajectory of nation-building.

Abbott in pursuit of power now proposes cutting the immigration intake, perhaps by as much as half, to ease pressure on house prices and job seekers.

Abbott in power was unable to stop the relentless blowouts in government spending and debt. Today he demands there be zero new government spending, outside defence.

Abbott as prime minister wanted the next generation of submarines to run on diesel and to be built in Japan. Abbott as aspirant wants Australia to consider nuclear-powered subs, bought from the US, Britain or France.

But the two really potent areas he's campaigning on are same-sex marriage and electricity prices. Pyne's indiscretion opened the way for Abbott to remind conservatives that he's the stalwart who will always oppose same-sex marriage and stand as the guardian of tradition in social values.

And he proposed overturning his own policies on electricity. The renewable energy target should be frozen where it is around 15 per cent. A moratorium should be put on building new subsidised wind farms. And the federal government should build new coal-fired coal plants.

Regardless of any inconsistencies and impracticalities, this is a pair of ideas that stir the Liberal base, and stir it powerfully. Abbott will continue to campaign against gay marriage and against renewable energy. This will agitate the Liberal Party and create an increasingly passionate constituency for an Abbott restoration.

Skilfully done, Abbott could well trap Turnbull in his Newspoll losing streak while simultaneously building an internal base for his own comeback.

And if it doesn't work? "He doesn't care if he doesn't make a comeback," suggests a minister loyal to Turnbull, "so long as he makes sure of Malcolm's fall in the process." It'd certainly be a satisfying consolation prize for the humiliated former prime minister.

A Labor frontbencher, in awe at the wilfulness of Abbott's blatantly self-interested destructiveness, asks: "Is this how we looked?" The answer, as onlookers know, is yes.

Peter Hartcher is political editor.

RELATED ARTICLES

[Marise Payne rebukes Tony Abbott, as former PM goes nuclear on submarines](#)

[Pyne apologises for 'damaging' same-sex marriage speech](#)