

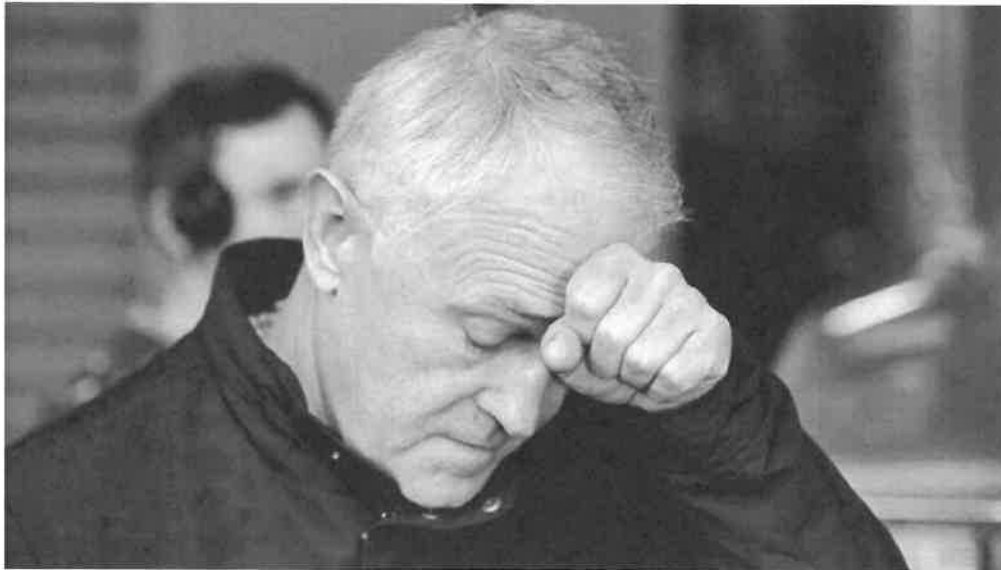
Federal election 2016: Turnbull yet to master transactional politics

GREG SHERIDAN

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Malcolm Turnbull wipes rain from his forehead during a wet day of campaigning. Photo: Jason Edwards

So just what kind of a national leader is Malcolm Turnbull? How does he compare internationally and with leaders of our own past?

If the count goes against him this week and Bill Shorten becomes prime minister, Turnbull will go down as the most electorally unsuccessful Liberal prime minister in Australian history, governing for a near record short period and taking a landslide electoral and parliamentary majority and turning it to ash in nine short months.

But assuming he hangs on as Prime Minister, either leading a minority government or with the barest of majorities in the House of Representatives, what have we learned about him from his time at the helm that helps us judge how he will perform?

In nations with similar political cultures to our own — the US, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland and a few others — and indeed in our own history, there are two basic types of leader: conviction leaders and transactional managers.

In modern democratic politics, the two great recent centre-right conviction leaders were Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Thatcher was a conservative her whole life. When she became prime minister she decided to break her nation's economic enfeeblement brought about by union power, to free up its internal economy and to - reassert its military strength, its solidarity with the US and international presence. She transformed Britain, and no one ever doubted what Thatcher stood for.

Reagan started life as a Democrat but for many decades before entering the White House was a conviction Republican. Like Turnbull, Reagan came to politics after a satisfying and successful career. Then he was for two terms governor of California and ran unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, before winning the presidency in 1980. No one ever doubted what Reagan stood for — he was a social conservative, economic reformer, low tax advocate, small government proponent, national security hawk and avatar of US power.

politician Dick Klugman at one point backing Bill Hayden against Hawke's leadership challenge because he thought Hayden had a deeper commitment to centrist economic policies. In office, Hawke, under the rubric of pragmatism, implemented deep, far-reaching, pro-free-market reform of the Australian economy, slashing corporate and personal tax rates, slashing tariffs, cutting government spending. Of course, all this was actually done by Paul Keating as treasurer, and Keating was supremely a conviction politician.

The successful transactional managers all had several traits in common — a near flawless sense of how to present themselves as operating always in the national interest, an ability to reconcile their base with whatever centrist or base-challenging policies they needed to adopt, very strong heavy lifters in their cabinet, and an absolute mastery of the day-to-day tactics of politics. Also, though assiduously portraying themselves as "father of the nation"-type statesmen, none was above fierce partisan campaigning. And though each of these leaders was at least at some points very popular, none was so transfixed by his own popularity as to be incapable of making necessary and at times fundamental adjustments.

It is fair to say that though plainly a transactional manager, Turnbull has not really demonstrated any of these skills at a high order so far. Not all transactional managers are successful.

The Republicans chose the veteran and formidable senator Bob Dole as their presidential candidate to take on Clinton in 1996. Dole was a very accomplished politician with a wonderful backstory of personal heroism in World War II.

But he made one remark that just about killed him. When trying to reassure conservative Republicans that he was really one of them, he said: "I can be the new Ronald Reagan if you want."

That was transactional politics at its absolute worst. No one who offers to adopt the persona of Ronald Reagan is in fact anything like Ronald Reagan, for Ronald Reagan could not have adopted any political persona other than his own.

So far, Turnbull has not conveyed the psychological traits of the successful transactional managers. Though they conveyed an image of consistency and steadiness, they were certainly capable of making big course adjustments. This involved the agonising psychological process of admitting they had made big mistakes.

One of the most obvious things Turnbull needs to acknowledge, at least to himself, is just what a god-awful campaign he ran. Barely surviving, if that, he needs much greater firepower in his camp. I firmly believe that he must bring back Tony Abbott to cabinet, yet after his extraordinary rant on election night, Turnbull's next statement seemed to indicate he was ruling that out. Turnbull needs big cats in his cabinet, free to undertake big actions backed by the Prime Minister in hopefully a well co-ordinated cabinet process.

Hawke had a lot of big cats in his government — not only Keating but John Button, John Dawkins, Gareth Evans and, initially, the man he defeated for the leadership, Bill Hayden, as foreign minister. Blair had Gordon Brown. TB and GB loathed each other with a splendid, festering passion that makes our political animosities look tame. But in his last election victory, the only one Blair was in danger of losing, Blair used Brown as a central player.

The successful transitional managers have superb emotional control, so that they can manage their colleagues and reassure and motivate the public. Turnbull does not so far demonstrate these qualities. He looks much more like Kevin Rudd than like Hawke or Howard.

Turnbull has been Prime Minister for nine months and he has had one really bad day, election day. How a leader performs under pressure is one of the best guides to his character. Turnbull's one bad day in office led to what was, quite frankly, a pretty bizarre prime ministerial rant well after midnight.

But the correct speech was surely not a mystery. At 10.30 or 11pm, Turnbull could have made a fine speech, thanking the people for giving him the honour of being Prime Minister, thanking his fallen colleagues for their courage and dedication, saying that while he still hoped to govern in a majority, no one could definitively call the election result that night, but whatever happened surely the things that unite us as Australians are greater than the things that divide us, and so on.

LIKE REPLY

**Alex**

38 MINUTES AGO

An empty suit in search of a body.

The self-appointed intelligentsia in this country that promoted this grand dilettante and pretender to the highest office in the land have a lot to answer for.

6 LIKE REPLY

**Nicolas**

1 HOUR AGO

Australia knew that Turnbull couldn't win a chook raffle. Even if he had all the winning tickets, somehow he would get it wrong. What were the Liberals thoughts when they brought him in, in September 2015. What needs to happen now is the party needs to make a conscise decision to move him on, there is no way he could win anything in the future. Cut the losses now and repair the Liberal party.

6 LIKE REPLY

**Robert**

1 HOUR AGO

What really upsets me off is the now very real threat of a government of the unions, by the unions and for the unions. Isn't this what Bill Shorten has already promised. Be afraid, be very afraid because whilst Gillard was union to the core, she didn't brazenly shout out about it.

Thanks MT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

6 LIKE REPLY

**Tanya**

1 HOUR AGO

Hmm if only, only.....we will go on forever dissecting the pros & corn till kingdom come. We still like to believe we still have the right to keep the badge "we are the lucky country", and we, should always be okay. As long we can hang politician that attempts to get the economy on a secure & safe run. Now why would anyone put himself/herself on the line for a call of duty. We live in a nation that upholds democratic values & It's the reason people from other part of the world migrate to have a go for a decent life. We set up institution to protect and serve us based on the principle of democracy; the rights and freedom to life. We just have to look at what is happening around the world. The Britexit from the European Union, the return of nationalist party putting up walls on trade & movements.

Sadly our nation & in particular Labor as a political party is not being honest with the Australian people nor do they

knifing not 1 but 2 PMs! How on earth Turnbull managed to let Shorten and co back into the fight with this background and with truckloads of evidence backing the DD trigger of the ABCC legislation is beyond me. Tony Abbott made plenty of errors as PM but I have absolutely no doubt he would have made mincemeat of Shorten on the campaign trail.

10    LIKE REPLY



Lisle

3 HOURS AGO

As a teenager in the 1940s I learnt where my affiliations rested when Chifley tried to nationalize the banks, but having said that, I have always had respect for the voting public when my side didn't win. Hawke was an example of this. We expected the union boss, but along comes this pragmatic man with his union accord to save Australia. What a disgrace that the Labor Party used him in old age to scar his image over mediscare.

However, Turnbull was different. One can never quite place where he came from. We saw him in the Spycatcher case - aggressive. Then the leader of the Republican Debate, and I suppose we see here an example of what the future held. His chances of winning were high, but then along came Ted Mack and others spoiling the game by demanding there be a public vote for Governor General (or whatever he/she would be called). Now Turnbull knew that this couldn't take place because of the powers held by the GG (think Whitlam), and the GG still held these powers, and does so today.

Turnbull was unable to accept that Bill Shorten had a plan, and therefore he and his advisors went about business as usual. The hints were all there day after day but to no avail. How often we were shouting on The Australian online, and elsewhere, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE UNIONS.

The Turnbull prime ministership has not only been a failure, but a disgrace, and this is what I find so disappointing.

Turnbull has ushered in by his non performance the new world trend (think Brexit and Trump), and so we end up with Xenophon and Hansen, who will now lead the path for more groups to form government in the future to the detriment of Liberal and Labor. That is a frightening prospect for our future.

1  LIKE REPLY



Paul

3 HOURS AGO

Brilliant article. Answers why we had an 8 week talk fest and not an election campaign but fails to answer one question: where in hell was the rest of the party?

economic growth and a highly productive fully employed work force. Bob Hawke and Paul Keating finally managed one of those things, growth, Rudd and Gillard destroyed them both, despite being given a winning start by Howard and Costello.

It's interesting to note that Thatcher and Regan delivered on both growth and productivity and the left vilified them for that success. It was no coincidence the left reacted to conviction leadership with such ferocity, Thatcher and Regan dumped the corporatist big government model, for a small government one and the West benefited; big message there for us in what style and convictions our leaders should hold.

4    LIKE REPLY



roger

14 MINUTES AGO

Regan was a Keynesian & massive spender

Clinton was the fiscal conservative

LIKE REPLY



Jason

4 EIGHT HOURS AGO

When governments are failing they are failing as a collective effort. Loading all the responsibility onto one person and jettisoning them and thinking that will solve all the problems is crazy. It is like a primitive tribe throwing a virgin into a volcano and thinking the gods will be pleased and will send good rain and an abundant harvest. It is nothing more than an act of faith, which might explain the tone of religious awe around so much of the commentary immediately following Turnbull's ascension - the Canberra press gallery are deep into this messianic fervour too.

The Liberals were unbelievably foolish to do what they did. It didn't matter that it was Turnbull doing it to Abbott - it would have been just as stupid if the situation had been reversed. In the six years prior to that act first-term leaders had been killed off by federal Labor, the Victorian Liberals and the Northern Territory Country Liberals and it had been a disaster for all of them. The federal Liberals were not ignorant of this, but they went ahead and did it anyway. They were either plain stupid to ignore the evidence of where this path would lead, or they were criminally negligent in ignoring the evidence.

Either way they don't deserve to run the country and neither does Labor, which is why we are now in this mess.

3    LIKE REPLY



Good article, except for the last sentence. We already know.

3 LIKE REPLY



Lee

5 HOURS AGO

What an informative, insightful and helpful article. Thanks

7 LIKE REPLY



Robyne

5 HOURS AGO

Good analysis Greg. I was waiting for the last couple of weeks when LNP would hammer Labor about it's union affiliations. Then, Labor, who are the best at fear mongering got in first. It doesn't really matter, too many people would rather be scared about Medicare than unions forcing companies to pay exorbitant wages, so that ultimately, jobs are lost. It is all short term, just like they were governing Greece for so many years. Australians can only hope that there is someone waiting in the wings who will be a politician with conviction. I really don't see that person coming from Labor with the ministers they have now.

12 LIKE REPLY



Stephen

5 HOURS AGO

Turnbulls support while Abbot was in opposition was from the Labor Greens Elites side of politics, this showed in his record popularity on dumping Abbot. They were happy to see Abbot gone, When Turnbull came to power they rejoiced, but push comes to a shove voted labor green and independent.

His strength was that he was an alternative to Abbot, just not a viable one. Abbot was all about conviction.

13 LIKE REPLY



Bruce

5 HOURS AGO

A good article, but the reality their is far more behind these peoples success. For example Howard was helped by Hawke government introducing the reforms and on the other side it was the Libs who had set up these reforms. These reforms only happened as each side played a part

3 LIKE REPLY



Kathy

5 HOURS AGO

I agree that Turnbull should have moved to Kirribilli house - it is an honor to be Prime Minister of Australia and to effectively say to the Australian people that the official Government residence in Sydney wasn't as good as his own pink palace was pathetic and indicates an appalling lack of

mainstream Australia wants real action not posturing and infighting..

12  LIKE REPLY



Michael

3 HOURS AGO

@Peter You can add authenticity to the conviction. You might not like what they are saying (note the mud being thrown at Hanson already) but you can't argue they're not authentic.

3  LIKE REPLY



Stan

7 HOURS AGO

All this gumpf about our dear leader. I thought we had a Prime Minister and not a President. I think the trend since Hawke (and certainly even earlier with Menzies) has been delusions of grandeur and aping the US President numero uno. This has been fostered by the media which has turned the position from a head honcho of cabinet - into a messiah like position. To chuck out a sitting Prime Minister (especially a devout RC one) is sacrilege and equated to the downfall of the two JCs (Mssrs Christ and Caesar). In reality the leader always has had a pretty small personal influence on everyday life. The public service and departments do their thing as they always have done - with the typical boof-head Ministers just getting in the way. Labour crowed about Gillard passing 150 bills in 3 years. The average journo probably couldn't name more than half a dozen and general public hardly any. Many just apple pie/mothers milk scribbles and a chance for many to get their name into Hansard.

Why can't the media and remove all the superstar and ego influence from the position and restore the incumbent as a mere mortal with main function as a "Manager". Historically many have actually been pretty thick - with ambition, guile individuality and perceived TV presentation skill being their main attributes). Management has rarely ever been one of their attributes - especially with lawyers (although John Howard had both some humility and management skills).

9  LIKE REPLY



Robin

4 HOURS AGO

@Stan Yes its about time these politicians realise they represent us and we pay their wages to manage Australia

LIKE REPLY

citizen44

7 HOURS AGO

**Diogenis**

1 HOUR AGO

@Jeff

The 2013 election was an aberration. It was only about ridding the nation of Labor, not voting in Abbott.

1 LIKE REPLY

**Raymond N**

3 HOURS AGO

@Diogenis Turnbull is a laborish / green luvvie but despite polls was unable to attract virtually any of their votes.

On the other hand, many conservatives in the coalition to whom the above is anathema, deserted to "Other" parties and independents.