

## **A failure in our democratic system**

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Glass jaws can be as common as self-fascination in the nation's media but there are times when serious analysis of the role of journalism in national affairs is useful. As editor-at-large Paul Kelly opined in our pages yesterday, now is just such a time. A modern throwaway mentality seems to have infected our politics; parties have discarded prime ministers, outside of elections, three times in the past five years. This is disruptive for policymaking — during the past eight years there have been five times that a new prime minister has had to reset the office — and it is unsettling for voters who have changed a prime minister only twice since 2007. Neither of those leaders (Kevin Rudd in 2007 and Tony Abbott in 2013) was given the chance by their party to serve out a term and seek re-election. No prime minister has served a full term since John Howard from 2004, and since then we've seen no lasting economic reform. This represents a failure in our democratic systems or, at the very least, a historic period of dysfunction.

### **Canberra, we have a problem**

“About this stage one should ask: how many prime ministers need to be deposed and how many cabinets need to be convulsed and how many reforms need to be lost and how much do the living standards of the people need to sink before there can be agreement we actually have a problem with our system?” Kelly wrote. Myriad factors should be considered when we discuss ways to engender stability and end this permanent reform paralysis. We can discuss the quality of political players, processes of our institutions, structures of our parties, domestic and global economic forces, societal trends, voter and interest group engagement and, surely, the quality of our relevant media. For politicians to advocate difficult reforms, there must be an opportunity for informed public debate. If we can talk matter-of-factly about the disruptive impact of digital media on traditional business models and how an information age transforms our lives, then it cannot be too much to ask that we contemplate how these dynamics may be influencing the tone and substance of political discussion.

### **Poll-driven panic**

In his outgoing press conference, Mr Abbott spoke of endless polling and “sour, bitter, character assassination” in commentary. “Poll-driven panic has produced a revolving-door prime ministership, which can't be good for our country, and a febrile media culture has developed that rewards treachery,” he said. For all the emotive language, Mr Abbott makes a strong point.

But too many journalists, especially in the Canberra press gallery, reacted with defensive anger. The Australian knows infallibility is as common as humility in the media but we have not shied away from this discussion. It is clearly not the case that Mr Abbott, Mr Rudd or Julia Gillard can attribute their downfalls to the media. Their errors, in each case, were manifest. And all broke promises. But the prevailing media climate helped to prevent them being given what they would regard as a fair opportunity to right their ships. Readers of Fairfax Media newspapers and audiences of the ABC would have been taken by surprise when Mr Rudd was felled because so little attention had been paid to his failings. Even with Ms Gillard, many errors were glossed over until they generated a momentum of their own. No hermit in any corner of the land could have missed the media focus on Mr Abbott's so-called gaffes and mini-scandals,

from Sir Duke Prince Philip to Bronwyn Bishop's rotor routine, yet there has been less focus on his greatest shortcoming — an inability to advocate and deliver economic reform. Social media has distorted media tendencies further towards superficiality and cheap populism. Just as the Rudd and Gillard governments were too reactive to this media cycle, Mr Abbott failed to counter the excited rhythms of the digital age, seemingly pushed around by events rather than controlling them. Malcolm Turnbull is a creature of this age, having run online businesses, but he too faces the task of shaping debate rather than being retweeted by it.

### **All have a stake in improving our national debate**

Politicians, journalists, editors, businesses, academics, interest groups and voters have a stake in improving our national debate and ensuring our democratic institutions can cope — we need to ensure instant information and real-time feedback don't trigger rushed decisions and shallow responses to complex issues. Kelly, the pre-eminent chronicler of political events during the past four decades, is worried about the press gallery's inability to "acknowledge the deep problems in the political system and the damaging consequences" of what he calls a crisis for the nation. "And if the political media, given its privileged position, cannot come to grips with this situation, whether through denial or self-interest or whatever, then Australia is in deeper trouble than we thought," he writes.

Mr Turnbull will try to resist the culture and control his message. "Well for a start," he said yesterday, "I have definitely ruled out answering rule-in, rule-out questions from journalists." Will he succeed? We hope so — and couldn't rule it out.