

Australia, disruption ahead as voters reject political contortions

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What we have at the moment is an election non-result, which is precisely the sort of inconclusive outcome capable of doing the nation greatest harm. Malcolm Turnbull remains caretaker Prime Minister, hoping to assemble a government with the thinnest of majorities — as little as one seat — or even an unlikely minority arrangement relying primarily on Queensland independent Bob Katter. Labor leader Bill Shorten is further from the ultimate prize but strutting triumphant at the damage his attacks have been able to inflict on the Coalition, albeit without significantly lifting Labor's primary vote but rather helping to scare voters towards minor party options. Mr Turnbull is wounded, perhaps fatally, and he must be seen as the architect of his own trauma.

Over the past decade the Coalition was given a masterclass in how to fritter away political capital as Labor knifed leaders and was forced into minority government, before it was subsequently defeated in a landslide. Yet, seemingly inured against these lessons, Mr Turnbull tore down Tony Abbott and now, in a tragic irony, could himself confront a hung parliament and minority government. As they say, those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.

While the leadership change now is history, it is impossible to ignore its ramifications on this election result. It seems clear that voters have again expressed their disdain for prime ministers being replaced between elections, for no apparent reason other than opinion polls and personal ambitions. Unsurprisingly, having elected national leaders, voters would prefer to offer a verdict on their performance rather than be presented with a replacement they had no say in. We appreciate the intricacies of the parliamentary system and how only a fraction of voters in the leaders' home electorates actually casts a ballot directly for the leadership alternatives. But the reality is that voters believe they are voting for a party and its leader and — as if we should have to say this again — politicians need to respect this fact and only act to change leaders if there is a compelling reason to do so.

It is impossible to overlook what appeared to be vengeance in some of the marginal seat results on Saturday. Some of the Liberal MPs who came into power on the back of Mr Abbott's strong campaigning and then actively set about undermining him and became publicly exposed as plotters for Mr Turnbull were set upon by voters. Look at Peter Hendy in Eden-Monaro, Fiona Scott in Lindsay and Wyatt Roy in Longman. Perhaps Craig Laundry in Reid was one lucky to escape these acts of political revenge. The loss of what was the safe seat of Mayo, by Abbott supporter Jamie Briggs who was forced to resign from the ministry earlier this year after overseas indiscretions, also proved costly. When it comes to individual seat results we also

must mention New England and Cowper where voters were discerning enough to reject comebacks from Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott who had turned their backs on their electorates at the last election after installing Julia Gillard's minority Labor government in 2010. They obviously sniffed the chance of being powerbrokers again yet, despite the contested result, voters have decided they should have no part in it. They were flatly rejected in favour of the Nationals who, free of leadership or ideological turmoil, have had a better election than their Coalition partners.

There will be many questions asked about the Coalition's strategy including the election timing, double dissolution plan, campaign length and campaigning tactics. It was a positive campaign, with Mr Turnbull relying heavily on his "jobs and growth" economic plan rather than aggressively warning about putting Labor back in power. Mr Shorten, who might have been vulnerable over Labor's record and prospects on border protection, carbon pricing, union corruption and fiscal management, was allowed to escape the campaign almost unscathed. Indeed his worst wounds were self-inflicted — the decision to go further into deficit over the forward estimates undermined Labor's fiscal credibility and a scandalously misleading scare campaign over Medicare might have damaged Mr Shorten's personal standing, even though it proved helpful in marginal seats. In the short term, however, there can be no doubt the damage he inflicted on the government must improve the Opposition Leader's standing. He was disciplined and focused throughout. Talk about a leadership challenge seems not only counter-productive but premature.

As our editor-at-large Paul Kelly has argued in his book *Triumph and Demise* and in these pages over recent times, we face an unravelling crisis in government. "The trust between the political system and the people to sustain ambitious policy may now be severed," Kelly wrote two years ago when Mr Abbott was prime minister. "Disillusionment in the community may be matched by deadlock in the parliament." Despite a leadership change, new Senate voting rules and a double dissolution election, the power of his observation is only amplified by the latest events. The ability of either side of politics to govern effectively right now is highly doubtful to say the least. And this happens at a time the budget is deep in structural deficit, the global economic climate is uncertain at best and we face geopolitical stresses of the highest order such as the strategic and economic rise of China, global retreat of the US, dismantling of the European Union and ongoing threat of Islamist extremism. At a time when we could well do with a government of national unity we are confronted by a fractious and palpable inability to govern.

If the Coalition is able to hold on to government, its most pressing problem will be unity. Those elements of the party and its supporter base who were most distressed at how Mr Abbott was dragged down will need to be assuaged. The best way to do this is to bring the former prime minister into a senior cabinet role. Mr Turnbull must demonstrate that his party can be, in policies and personnel, the broad church it aspires to be. Such a show of unity is important both for the party and the nation as the government attempts to navigate a course forward. It must

be accompanied by an acceptance from the conservative groups that under Mr Abbott they made many mistakes. Both strands must chart a path forward together.

Should it survive, the government will be confronted by a Senate every bit as difficult as the one preceding the election. Nick Xenophon has emerged as a powerbroker in both houses, with Rebekha Sharkie unseating Mr Briggs in Mayo and at least two other senators joining the Nick Xenophon Team leader. The greatest risk for the nation is that the blocking power of Labor and the Greens in the Senate, together with the interventionist and protectionist instincts of the crossbenchers, will lock in a period of high spending, high taxing and low growth at a time when the economy needs the opposite. In other words the reckless fiscal policies Labor took to the election could be imposed by default. The age of entitlement will be entrenched rather than overcome.

Seemingly seduced by his own popularity, Mr Turnbull and his supporters have delivered a result hardly better than Julia Gillard delivered under the duress of Kevin Rudd's leaking and sniping. The agenda the Coalition took to the election was Mr Abbott's but it was not prosecuted with the former leader's passion and zeal. *The Australian* always argued Mr Abbott could have won re-election and, of course, we will never know. But we do know he would have argued the case more strongly over border protection, a carbon price and higher taxes. These lessons have been learned the hard way. But if the Coalition cannot win an election where Labor is promising an unabashed mix of higher taxing, higher spending, deeper deficits and higher debt, then either the public doesn't care, or the Coalition has to improve its advocacy.

We await the counting and question whether the Australian Electoral Commission can update its processes. If the Coalition clings to a majority, as Mr Turnbull has suggested, the delays and uncertainty in the count will have greatly diminished its authority and perhaps damaged its mandate along the way. We also await rulings on what appear to be deliberately false Medicare scares with cards and text messages in the final days. Honesty does matter in politics. And we despair that the election trigger bills that would do no more than restore the rule of law to construction sites and unions, might be lost. Australia faces more disruption.