

Malcolm the belittler: a ruthless climber cut down to size



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In November 2007 I conducted the ballot for Liberal leader which Brendan Nelson won by three votes. No sooner had I declared the result than Malcolm Turnbull disputed it. And told me Nelson was not up to the job.

I suggested Nelson had won fairly, that Malcolm should accept the result and that if Brendan was as bad as he said then the party would turn to him. "Put in an outstanding performance as shadow treasurer and you will win over your colleagues," I said.

Turnbull left the room and went down to Nelson's office to give him a free character assessment. The leaks and the back-grounding started that day. Turnbull's supporters were ruthless in tearing down Nelson. Weakened by this campaign and suffering poor polls, Nelson called another ballot. Turnbull won by four votes. In total, only three votes moved. It was an ominous sign. He got there, but not by building support among his colleagues.

Nevertheless, Turnbull began well. He promised to promote Liberal unity and told the party it could win under him. Nelson accepted his fate and did nothing in revenge. The next putative leaders - Hockey and Abbott - voted for Turnbull. He had no rivals. No one gave him the Nelson treatment.

To promote unity, Turnbull needed to give all the shades of party opinion a say in proceedings, and to promote colleagues on merit regardless of whether

they voted for or against him.

Turnbull had used the polls as a weapon against Nelson. This is a two-edged sword. It will come back to haunt you if your own polls turn for the worse. At first, Turnbull did better. But at the end of June, a plan to bring down the Prime Minister spectacularly backfired when it turned out the key evidence was forged. Turnbull's satisfaction rating plummeted. There has been no fall like it in federal politics. The Liberal Party is enormously tolerant with its leaders. It will overlook a multitude of failings if it thinks the leader will bring electoral success. The party went along with John Hewson after the 1990 election because it believed he could win. Or to put it another way, it thought the 1993 election was unlosable. When he lost that election, Hewson lost all authority.

As he plunged in the polls, Turnbull needed to carefully reassure and cultivate the party base. Liberal supporters who work in the branches and hand out the cards on election day will compromise on policy if they think it will lead to government and the chance to implement bigger political objectives. But they do not see it as much of a trade to betray their policy beliefs in a losing cause.

The Liberal Party grassroots are emphatically opposed to the Rudd Government's emissions trading legislation. They do not believe this ETS is right, nor do they believe it necessary to legislate now. They do not believe it is for Liberal MPs to get Labor's legislation through the Senate.

They believe an Opposition should expose the failings of this scheme. Senators are selected by the party's activists and are therefore especially sensitive to the views of the party membership. An experienced leader would understand this and take

it into account.

A political leader cannot take his base for granted. He must give voice and confidence to the party membership. Australian politics is detribalising. Rusted-on supporters are fewer than ever. To keep those supporters, a party must nourish and respect them. Having a base vote of about 40 per cent and holding it is what distinguishes the major parties from the Greens or Family First.

Turnbull promised to promote unity. But it is hard to think of any step he took to implement it. It is hard to think of any time when the party has been so deeply riven. This is not because of ideological difference. The overwhelming view of the party membership is sensible measures that will not undermine Australia's competitive position should be taken in step with developments among major emitters. There is considerable consensus on that.

The disunity is a consequence of how the issue has been managed and broadened out to concerns about the management of the party in general. I have never seen a Liberal leader attack senior colleagues in the way Turnbull did on the weekend. Turnbull's attacks have been sharper and inflicted more damage on his colleagues than Kevin Rudd ever did.

The Turnbull experiment is now over. It is not surprising it came to this. Tony Abbott has his opportunity. He has everything before him. The party must lock in behind him and move on.

And to do that, the last year is best buried and forgotten, along with the madness of the Hewson and the Latham eras.

Peter Costello is a former Liberal MP and federal treasurer.

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