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'Interesting times' ahead?

By Chris Hubbard

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The Parliamentary Liberal Party is starting to live in increasingly “interesting times”, as the Chinese have it. How else to describe the bubbling antagonisms, the needling in-fighting and the resentments towards Leader Malcolm Turnbull’s preferences, as he re-designs his frontbench yet again?

But surely this is the stuff of politics in Australia, where a Leader’s “complete support” for a colleague, something heard often enough in Canberra and elsewhere, is likely to shorten or hobble his or her career considerably.

As Leader of the Opposition, Turnbull is confronted with the thankless task of knitting together a Parliamentary team willing to sing from the same song sheet, or at least appear to be doing so. And to have to continually shore up his front bench against incipient collapse. Without the sheer weight of resources, of all kinds, which are available in government, a fractious and disunited front bench is certainly not what any Leader needs. Add to that mounting speculation that Peter Costello is fishing for his job, and the times are indeed “interesting” for Malcolm Turnbull. This is especially so since Costello has made few recent attempts to hose down such claims.

Many will recall a similar situation back in 1991, when Paul Keating called in Bob Hawke’s 1988 promise to yield to him the premiership after a successful 1990 election campaign. Keating challenged Hawke for the leadership, lost the vote in caucus, resigned as Treasurer and spent an uncomfortable six months on the backbenches. He looked like a fish out of water then, just as Peter Costello does today.

The analogy does not end there; both had been long-serving Treasurers (Keating for eight years, Costello for a record-breaking 11) and loyal (if long-suffering) deputies to successful Prime Ministers who, when pushed on making way for new blood, pushed back vigorously.

But Keating went on to defeat Hawke in a Party ballot in December 1991, becoming Prime Minister for more than four years.

Turnbull on the other hand must soldier on as Opposition Leader of an increasingly dysfunctional and disloyal senior parliamentary team. Not for him the cement of electoral success, at least not yet.

As John Howard [reminded his audience](#) at the Menzies Research Centre in Melbourne recently, success comes to political parties as a result of their predictable and consistent performance over a considerable time. Love them or loathe them, mused Howard, at least the Australian people knew what the Liberal Party stood for. It is fairly doubtful that Turnbull, present at Howard’s pep talk, would have spent much time contemplating the finer things of the party political life; after all, there’s trouble brewing for the LPA in that river city and beyond.

Consider the score so far: Julie Bishop’s recent forced resignation as Treasury spokesperson after serious party angst over her performance; and the resultant re-shuffle, the big winners being finance spokesman Joe Hockey’s elevation to Shadow Treasurer and Helen Coonan’s installation in Hockey’s place.

All robust, knock-about stuff, one might say, but what about the rest of the unrest?

Tony Abbott, spokesman for families, ploughs his own furrow in the media over the costs of prospective pension rises.

Meanwhile, Andrew Robb performs a similarly radical convolution over the Opposition’s acceptance of the Rudd Government’s Emissions Trading Scheme proposals.

And the whole lot is topped off by the sheer pettiness of parliamentary secretary for disabilities Cory Bernardi's (alleged) stoush with Christopher Pyne over very old ground indeed.

The list is starting to add up for Turnbull, indeed it is beginning to look like carelessness for a leader who must now be waiting for something akin to the sky falling in. He may just get it in the shape of an invigorated former Treasurer, one Peter Costello.

Having drifted phantom-like over the back benches, content to play the doppelganger to Turnbull's Caesar, Costello is now supremely well positioned to ride into the breached walls of the Parliamentary Liberal Party. There is a limit to the patience of those among Turnbull's senior party colleagues on the right who are not pleased with his leadership style. This view was strengthened this week by his moves to replace party president Alan Stockdale. It was reinforced by the powerful right winger, Nick Minchin's enthusiastic support for the qualities of the sacked Bernadi.

But these are symptoms of a wider malaise - the entrenched and destructive interior struggles for personal ascendancy amid the political wastelands of Opposition. For the Parliamentary Liberal Party, its despatch to Coventry after 11 years of government was a pill just too bitter to swallow.

The question which now needs urgent resolution, however, is "where to from here" for Malcolm Turnbull and his fighting forces. The nature of political life in Australia is, in its essence, the getting and (equally important) the keeping of power. The reasons for doing so are, for individual politicians, less important and therefore of less interest to voters in this democracy.

Nevertheless, the time has arrived for Peter Costello to cast off his enigmatic smile when pressed, yet again, to commit to a run for LPA leadership. Should he finally say "Yes" or emphatically "No, not ever, under no circumstances whatsoever" the die would be cast, and the political chess pieces would continue to cross the board. At least then, Costello could with conviction state, as John Howard did in Melbourne, that - love him or loathe him - at least Australians knew where he stood.

Is it reasonable to expect, nearly two years out from the next federal election, that Costello's current neutral smile could soon be transformed into his trademark smirk?

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