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# To avoid relegation, Turnbull must restore an authority missing since Howard

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# To avoid relegation, Turnbull must restore an authority missing since Howard

## **Abstract**

Being an Australian political leader is a little like being an English Premier League manager. While the team plays well you have the adulation of fans and management; fail and your time in the job will not be long. Tony Abbott's removal should come as no surprise to any student of Australian politics. He had made a few poor calls and the team was headed for defeat. He paid the price for failure.

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# THE CONVERSATION

## To avoid relegation, Turnbull must restore an authority missing since Howard

September 15, 2015 11.23am AEST

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It seems to be an extremely difficult task for a party leader, even as prime minister, to stamp their authority on the party. AAP/Sam Mooy

Being an Australian political leader is a little like being an English Premier League manager. While the team plays well you have the adulation of fans and management; fail and your time in the job will not be long.

Tony Abbott's removal should come as no surprise to any student of Australian politics. He had made a few poor calls and the team was headed for defeat. He paid the price for failure.

### Where are we now in history?

Abbott is not the first prime minister to have suffered this fate. John Gorton lost office in 1971; Bob Hawke fell victim to Paul Keating in 1991; and there was the revolving door of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

Removing a leader while they are prime minister is relatively uncommon when seen in the light of the frequency with which the leadership of the opposition changes. One thinks of John Howard and Andrew Peacock in the 1980s and the three Liberal Party leaders between 2007 and 2010.

On the other hand, there are periods when a leader is able to dominate their party. Gough

Whitlam dominated the Labor Party for more than ten years, and even a massive electoral loss in 1975 did not lead to his demise at that time. After being removed as opposition leader by way of party coup in 1989, Howard came back to be one of Australia's most successful prime ministers.

However, Hawke's great electoral successes did not save him in 1991.

Some things suggest themselves in looking at the removal of leaders in Australian politics. The first is that ideological factors do not seem to have played much of a part. Leadership generally is understood in terms of who is most likely to lead the party to power and provide the fruits of office for it.

The second is that political parties run on the ambition of those who want to be leader. Becoming a leader is only a first step in consolidating control. Any stumbles and the defeated will be looking for an opportunity to take the leader down. This seems to be particularly the case when there is an intense rivalry between two individuals, such as Gorton and Billy McMahon, Howard and Peacock, Hawke and Keating, Rudd and Gillard, Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull.

It seems to be an extremely difficult task for a party leader, even as prime minister, to stamp their authority on the party. The key is obviously success, as Robert Menzies proved in the 1950s and 1960s and Howard after 1996. But these periods of dominance by a single figure are balanced by periods when individuals struggle to establish themselves over their fellows.

In that sense, the struggle between Abbott and Turnbull is nothing new. Since 2007 neither major party has produced a leader capable of imposing themselves as possessing a sort of natural dominance. Instead, there has been a cesspool of ambition as a number of individuals, in both major parties, seek to impose themselves on their respective party.

The merry-go-round of leaders has largely been the consequence of the failure of both major parties to find leaders of sufficient quality.

## **A promise to restore 'traditional cabinet government'**

In his speech challenging Abbott, Turnbull referred to the poor performance of cabinet government under Abbott and called for its renewal. After the ballot, Turnbull promised to restore "a traditional cabinet government" where the prime minister is "first among equals".

One of the features of Westminster-style governments over the past 20 years has been the increasing concentration of power in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the declining importance of cabinet.

Canadian political scientist Donald Savoie has described this process as the creation of a court around a prime minister, composed of key advisers, along with some senior ministers and public servants. It may be the case that the cabinet has become too unwieldy an instrument for an increasingly powerful prime minister to govern effectively.

It may also be the case that there is a need to reverse this concentration of power and for cabinet and parliament to act as a check and balance on the PMO's power.

With this increasing concentration of power two things happen. One is that the prize of the prime ministership becomes even more alluring, especially to those with massive ambition.

The second is that the country's welfare depends even more on the holder of that office. Australia's problem is that since 2007 we have not really had prime ministers of sufficient calibre. Instead, we have had an incessant struggle for power by those who believed they had the goods.

Certainly Turnbull has ambition. He has now achieved his goal. The real question is if he has the capacity to lift himself above the ruck and provide the leadership that Australia has lacked since John Howard. Will he seek to restore the importance of cabinet? Or will he continue the path of concentrating power in the hands of the prime minister?

He has one shot – his team faces relegation.

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*Gregory will be one hand for an Author Q&A between 3:30 and 4:30pm AEST on Tuesday, September 15, 2015. Post your questions in the comments section below.*



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Malcolm Turnbull  
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