

# Why Turnbull opted for such a long campaign

By Andrew Elder

19 May 2016



**Journalists need to take a closer look at both Labor and LNP policy without letting Turnbull bamboozle them as he has in the past. The reason he's opted for a long campaign is to build his campaign team from scratch, writes [Andrew Elder](#).**

*"Starting a company is like throwing yourself off the cliff and assembling an airplane on the way down."*

~ [Reid Hoffman](#), founder of LinkedIn

THE REASON why Malcolm Turnbull opted for such a long campaign is because he has to build his campaign team from scratch.

The team that took the Liberal Party from defeat in 2007 through coming close to winning in 2010 and then regaining office in 2013 has largely remained loyal to Abbott. Most of those who weren't personally loyal to

Abbott are just old-school campaign junkies who confuse action with progress, people who get rewarded with staffer jobs but who suck at actual slow-and-steady government.

The Nationals have experienced less of a turnover, but their ranks are full of people who were perfectly happy with Warren Truss, less so with Joyce. Backroom boys and girls always have a tough time with those who see themselves as having the common touch, and who back their own judgments over those of the data-wranglers and those who've watched *The West Wing* a little too ardently.

Turnbull has always had clever people around him, but there are different kinds of cleverness — people who crunch data on social issues and/or can boil down a fat academic tome on cities or defence into a snappy precis, and engage on the issues just enough with his sharp and well-honed mind. Turnbull uses this to impress journalists and others just how clever he is, which is why the entire press gallery fell so hard for him:

*'Malcolm Turnbull's standing as the Coalition's great communicator has taken a second hit ...'*

Well, [Michael Gordon](#), you will keep setting up these straw men. I can see why people thought Hawke was a great communicator, but Turnbull? Where is the proof? He failed at the republic and was unconvincing as both minister for Murray-Darling water and for the national telecommunications system. He's

good at close quarters but can't work a crowd, because when has he ever gotten anything from a crowd?

*Crowds are noisy, unreasonable and impatient. They can trample you easier than a single person can. And a crowd will never buy you lunch.*

- P.J. O'Rourke *Parliament of Whores*

has anyone rolled out the "Turnbull is a great communicator" line recently?  
[#ausvotes](#)

— Zac Spitzer (@zackster) [May 15, 2016](#)

Turnbull's people aren't scrappers. They haven't had to fight for much, and being uncouth has counted against them rather than been rewarding, as it was for the Abbotts or Rudds of this world. They aren't particularly loyal to the Liberal Party *per se* (which is why they are using that Turnbull Australia livery: it means more to their team, such as it is, than that not-quite-retro 1970s-stylised blue "L"). They don't have any of that "romance of the road" that enables people to tolerate substandard conditions and upheaval day after day, all those flights and buses and cars and hotels/motels and late nights/early mornings and now Adelaide, now Queensland, now Westensinnyyyyyyyyyyyyyy ...

That leaves the Liberal Party with Tony Nutt, former Liberal State Director in about four states. Nutt is tough and shrewd; very hard to put anything over him. Nutt is fascinated by marginal seats and targeted

campaigning and all that jazz in the way that Turnbull isn't — Abbott wasn't either, but he knew he needed it so he outsourced it to Credlin and Loughnane. Nutt could've been a great minister or a very good CEO. What he can't do is run a national campaign on his lonesome. Nobody can. Turnbull's people are the sort who'd bring plastic cutlery to a knife fight; Nutt would bring a chainsaw, but he can only do so much.

He could commandeer people from the states:

There are some good people with impressive track records from NSW who aren't sulking with Abbott, but not many:

- **Victoria** is pretty much full of deadshits. It takes a village to raise a child and it takes a village of idiots to overlook or cover up for someone like Damian Mantach. The IPA are no good at campaigning because their ideas fail on actual contact with humans. Most other operators have had a run-in with Kroger or one of the sub-sub-factional warriors to which he franchises out the hard and dirty work of on-the-ground campaigning, leaving that state run by numbskulls with good people ostracised or confined to the sidelines. Kroger will scream blue murder if a) the second-raters close to him are snaffled by the feds and cruelly exposed in the far provinces beyond Murray's northern bank, or b) those who have incurred his disfavour get opportunities from the feds that he would deny them.
- **Queensland?** I mean, I ask

you. Blowing the biggest electoral majority this side of Iran *in three years* really is apocalyptically stupid (even worse than Victoria above). None of those people have much to offer their local municipality, let alone the nation; the few exceptions are rusted onto Barnaby, even though he has racked off to NSW. That places more weight than is wise upon James McGrath, the man who went to London and ensured that Boris Johnson left no political legacy whatsoever — and who would do the same to Turnbull, vastly overestimating coded appeals to racism and other lame shit like that.

- **South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, the Territories?** [No, no, no, no, no](#). Everyone with ambition and capability has gotten the hell out of there.

Turnbull would have crashed with a traditional 30-something day election campaign. It doesn't matter that he cancelled a street walk in Penrith, or lunched at a gentlemen's club in Melbourne, and no amount of traditional media hype can make it matter seven weeks from now.

Note what happened to Labor in 2010 after Rudd's 2007 campaign team fragmented. Some sat out the usurper (as Abbott's people are doing now), some took the mining industry's lolly; others couldn't quite believe it would be that bad for their side and never lifted beyond second gear, unprepared for Abbott's ferocity. A longer campaign gives the Turnbull government more time for a team to be

assembled, and to gel in that mysterious way management theorists and sport coaches wax lyrical about but rarely deliver.

It is not so long that people lose focus. The second of July will be upon us all soon, regardless of our different involvement in this campaign, and the imperative will be on all to make the best of it. Turnbull is backing himself, and others will back him too — whether those people are those the Coalition needs is an open question. Shorten is backing himself, and momentum is as important within campaign teams as it is to the public beyond them.

Everyone's agile and innovative when they've got a rocket up them — or they flame out. Now you can see why the Liberals are like that with regard to workplace relations.

[new column] [#Election2016](#): Turnbull leads on popularity but Shorten looks sharper, clearer, confident [@australian](#) <https://t.co/oxQh7Np8nX>

— Troy Bramston (@TroyBramston) [May 9, 2016](#)

Peta Credlin was a member of Turnbull's staff in 2008, and it's fair to say that her efforts then and since have put Turnbull where he is today. If Nutt and Turnbull manage to build a team that comes together and fires at the right time, she will be both nasty and pathetic at the same time, like the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* after

being doused with water\*. If not, she'll simply sigh at the Coalition's stumbles and diagnose every problem with "not enough Tony".

This is why "campaign trail journalism" is so lame and such bullshit:

- **Firstly**, [Tim Crouse belled that cat in 1972](#), and since then this sub-genre has never been bettered or redeemed.
- **Secondly**, Australian journalists do not have the feel for local communities that older-style U.S. journalists had. Regional and suburban journalism has been all but wiped out in Australia, and it was rarely a first step for national journalists as it was in the U.S. or UK. Campaign-trail journalists waft in off the bus and make half-witted, shallow observations about communities, which discredits those media outlets for paying customers who live in them ("if they're wrong about our community, what else are they wrong about? Why are we watching this?"), to which news directors respond by making each successive campaign more and more vacuous.
- **Thirdly**, who appointed the media the "on message"

police? When Duncan Storrar or Melinda ask about educational and employment opportunities, they're not going "off message" — they're trying to relate life in Australia as they know it to life in Australia as politicians would describe it. Politicians need to relate to voters, and vice versa: the media are meant to be the conduit for this, not to get in the way or pretend the dialogue is about something else. Party hacks have an imperative to be "on message" — that's their job, not the journalists', and not members of the public who are the point of every election. To hell with "on message", and to hell with the fewer than a thousand people across the nation who overestimate its importance.

- **Fourth**, cross-continental smirking while waiting for someone to gaffe is tiresome, and fatal to the engagement media organisations crave for survival and relevance. Journalists become mobile jukeboxes of cliches, idly wondering if there are enough such cliches to keep them going for two months. There aren't,

of course. The reason why press gallery journalism sucks so hard is because they sit around Canberra for two-and-a-half years ignoring actual policy and governing and stuff, wishing they were on the campaign trail; and when on the campaign trail, they half-heartedly complain about the shallowness of it all, without admitting that they couldn't do policy if they tried. Their political cliches are exhausted before the writs have been issued. The engagement media organisations need for their very survival becomes swamped by the apathy they themselves have engendered.

- **Fifth**, you can't explain why Shorten and Labor are competitive without reference to policy. Given that Shorten hasn't had a charisma transplant, vacuous non-policy theatre-review analysis simply can't and won't work. Coverage of policy is done better [off the campaign trail](#) than [on it](#) (wtf does "tapdance a little faster" really mean, and would anyone with more than 10 minutes' experience of politics honestly believe more

hype and stunts would improve anything?).

- **Sixth**, for media organisations looking to cut costs, two months of junkets to produce audience-repellent content is unsustainable. The "romance of the road" leads to in-jokes and inability to communicate with those who weren't there at the time; which is everyone, and that defeats the very idea of journalism. Everything you had wanted, or will want, to say about the "romance of the road" has been done in [this song](#) — thanks anyway. The major parties are increasingly creating their own content and are happy to provide it direct to the newsroom for free (no Alice, staffers are not [playing journalist](#), they are working to replace you and you are helping them).

[@BernardKeane](#)

Expectation that the "great communicator" Turnbull should win. So very bad if Shorten got the points [#auspol](#)

— E P Conrad  
(@altimetr) [May 13, 2016](#)

Turnbull needs a long campaign to build his team, which will by necessity be a different team to the one he (kind of) inherited from Abbott. If it works for Turnbull he'll have a new team for government, one that will carry on into 2019. If not, he can walk away knowing he did his best, leaving others to piece together what it means to be a Liberal in this century: a bit of Abbott rage and resentment here, a magazine cover of the royal family there, a tax cut — maybe something can be cobbled together from all those broken bits, who knows.

Shorten is a long-game player, a quality not seen since Howard or Rudd and not fully understood even by experienced journalists. Paul Kelly described Shorten as "[sharper and crisper](#)" than Turnbull, which would be great if the alternative Prime Minister was a white wine. This election can only be understood with regard to policy: Labor have more of it, and it is more consistent, than that of the government. [This "out of the blocks faster" crap](#), or

oenological metaphors, defeat the fundamental task of journalism: to explain what is going on, and why it matters. Traditional political journalism isn't good enough for this campaign. Everyone who thinks it might be is wrong, even if they've backed themselves like Turnbull and Shorten have.

Journalists could have a closer look at Labor policy, but that won't be done from the back of a hall in a marginal seat. They could have a closer look at government policy too, and Turnbull will try to work out a way to razzle-dazzle and bamboozle them as he has in the past. Having begun his working life at the feet of an old-school media mogul, he assumes *vox media vox populi*, which journalists of his vintage and journalism educators take as gospel. I don't think he is right about that, but when it comes to politics and the not-quite-dead press gallery I've been wrong before — or maybe just ahead of my time.

Update: credit to [\[ \$\\$\$ \] Laura Tingle](#)

and [Lenore Taylor](#), two of the better journalists in the press gallery, who have each come to question the ongoing value of campaign trail journalism.

\* While it's true that women in public life ought not be regarded as witches as a general rule, Peta Credlin's systematically misogynistic (e.g. "ditch the witch") campaign against Julia Gillard puts her in breach of one of the iron laws of Australian politics: *What's Sauce For The Goose Is Sauce For The Gander* (as amended from time to time).

***This article was [originally published on 14 May 2016 and is republished with permission. You can follow Andrew Elder on his blog \[Press Gallery Reform\]\(#\) or on \[Twitter @awelder\]\(#\).](#)***

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