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## Turnbull enters a weird twilight zone of conceit



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Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 12:00AM November 8, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull’s approach to the citizenship fiasco offers a valuable insight into how he approaches leadership. His belated call on Monday for politicians to produce a citizenship declaration was preceded by his now familiar intransigence. It has caused an unnecessary loss of political capital when the cupboard is already rather bare and it betrays a leadership style long on swagger and short on political nous.

Alas, all leaders and many wannabes have mega supplies of confidence and self-belief. Arrogance and ego constitute the ugly though familiar fabric of politics. But Turnbull’s conceit has entered a twilight zone of weirdness even for Canberra, post Kevin Rudd.

Like Citizen Kane, the 1940s character created by Orson Welles to tell the story of a very rich man irresistibly drawn to politics with no clue what he wanted, apart from power, and whose convictions cannot be discerned from his positions, Turnbull seems destined to be cut down by his arrogance. “I have never had more fun in my life.” That was the Prime Minister last week when asked to comment on the crisis surrounding his government after the High

Court declared deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce and Nationals deputy Fiona Nash were dual citizens, in breach of section 44 of the Constitution.

His bizarre bravado was evident throughout this sorry saga. Turnbull moved seamlessly from attacking the “incredible sloppiness” and “extraordinary negligence” of Greens senators Scott Ludlam and Larissa Waters (who stepped down from the Senate) to refusing to admit the need for an audit to settle the question as to whether there has been more sloppiness and negligence on the part of other politicians. And there was, within his government.

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His ego seemed to block an ability to see what voters saw: the hypocrisy of a Prime Minister fulminating in August over the need for Bill Shorten to produce evidence that he was not a dual citizen but resisting a call for other MPs to do the same to bring closure to a looming constitutional crisis where laws passed by MPs ineligible to sit in parliament turned out to be invalid.

Then came the weird set of recent Turnbull talking points about witch-hunts and lynch mobs when it came to legitimate voter concerns that more dual citizens might be sitting in parliament. Rather than immediately settle on a sensible process to check the citizenship of MPs, Turnbull doubled down on his misguided strategy of confected puff and outrage by dragging the Holocaust into the issue last week after The Australian raised questions on the eligibility of Josh Frydenberg, whose mother came to Australia from Hungary as a stateless person escaping the Holocaust.

It would be a truly grotesque application of section 44 if Hungary can bestow citizenship on Frydenberg, via his mother, without any further action by two people who most certainly do not want to be Hungarian citizens considering the treatment of his family during World War II.



Citizen Kane, the 1940s character created by Orson Welles, astride stacks of newspapers.

But it was preposterous for the Prime Minister to use the Holocaust to bolster a ridiculous line about witch-hunts and lynch mobs to shut down a critical issue as to whether more politicians sat in parliament in breach of the Constitution. This was not a witch-hunt or a lynch mob. It became a circus of the Prime Minister's making.

Turnbull's attempt to fob off an audit as too complicated, and as an insult to the rule of law, was an insult to our intelligence. While it's true that the High Court has the final say on provisions in the Constitution, that's the same position with thousands of complicated laws that are also the subject of compliance audits regularly undertaken by thousands of businesses across the country. Indeed, a recent regime dreamt up by the Turnbull government lays out a swath of new measures to make bank executives accountable, the argument being that banks sit at the centre of many decisions Australians make and we must therefore have trust and confidence in the banking system.

Politicians sit at the pinnacle of a system of government that relies on our trust and confidence, much like bankers. Yet they are the most unregulated group of employees in the country. They have a few laws particular to them — for example, those around travel and work entitlements — and a few sections in the Constitution. It's not too much to expect careful compliance. Yet Turnbull had to be dragged kicking and screaming to better transparency of MP entitlements.

And he repeated the same error of judgment over citizenship, with the Monday announcement curiously made within hours of new citizenship questions about yet another Liberal MP, John Alexander. This makes a laughing-stock of Scott Morrison, who told us last week that “it’s time to move on”.

To his credit, Greens leader Richard Di Natale understood what was at stake from the start, telling *The Australian*, “we’re not talking about a parking fine or a speeding ticket, we’re talking about the founding document. If you can’t respect the Constitution, then what’s left in a democracy?”

It took until Monday for the Prime Minister to announce that he was “standing up for the Constitution”. But the excruciating delay in the face of the bleeding obvious raises one question: what took him so long?



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Last week, a sports journalist at *The Times* might have unwittingly explained the problem here. Writing about what made a great athlete, columnist Matthew Syed put forward two conflicting propositions. “Great athletes are hyper-confident. They don’t believe they have any weaknesses. That is what makes them invincible.” And this: “Great athletes are humble. They are conscious of their weaknesses. That is what drives self-improvement.”

Syed asked whether greatness comes from the swaggering confidence of a Muhammad Ali and Serena Williams or the preternatural humility of a Jonny

Wilkinson and Rafael Nadal. He settled on a truth that applies equally to sport as it does to politics and many other areas. Greatness comes from both - humility and confidence, and each is needed at different points in the performance cycle. "We need humility when evaluating, or practising, or working on weaknesses. "We need to see our flaws in a clear-eyed way to address them. That is what self-improvement means. But we need exaggerated self-assurance when executing. We need to be infused with a sense of our own efficacy, the better to deliver on the big stage," wrote Syed, pointing to David Beckham, who practised with determination on his weaknesses but was smouldering with confidence on the field.

Modesty away from the camera. Total assurance in front of it. Perhaps Turnbull has made a mess of the citizenship fiasco because he's not known for blending humility and confidence. In 1991, The Sydney Morning Herald's Good Weekend magazine ran an extended interview with Turnbull, together with a photo of him lounging back on a ruby red sofa, staring down the camera. When asked about his definition of humility, Turnbull paused. Then said, "Don't think I'd have anything original to contribute on that. I mean, I think I'd have to look up a dictionary to see what it means. I guess humility is being suitably modest about yourself and your attainments." Then he said: "Humility is for saints."

More than two decades later, Citizen Turnbull shouldn't imagine that voters will give his leadership, and his government, a free pass on the citizenship debacle that he turned into a monstrous mess.