

Barnaby Joyce affair: Turnbull's authority weakened



Barnaby Joyce is consoled in the House of Representatives in Canberra. Picture: Kym Smith

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Barnaby Joyce created the mess but **Malcolm Turnbull has helped turn it into a Coalition crisis**. The absence of internal trust and political management has opened a schism between the Liberals and the Nationals, leading to open warfare between their leaders. For the government to survive, they cannot both remain in place.

When the Prime Minister called a media conference late on Thursday, after he and his deputy had survived a fortnight of parliamentary pain triggered by Joyce's personal mess, we were entitled to see an effort to change the subject. **Instead, in a belated and misguided effort to cauterise the issue, Turnbull poured petrol on the flames.**

Any functioning adult already knew it was unacceptable for ministers to have sexual relations with staff; this is why Joyce and his media adviser, Vikki Campion, decided almost a year ago that she needed to shift offices. Imposing a heavy-handed rule has served only to deepen the divide between the leaders and invite ridicule.

The overwhelming responsibility for this mess rests with the Deputy Prime Minister but the Prime Minister is not blameless. Between the two of them, and their offices, they needed to manage it.

The usual truism that nothing is ever as good or as bad as it seems in politics is turned on its head in this case — what should have been the irrelevant personal shenanigans of just one MP has become an unholy fiasco exposing the government's underlying weaknesses and undermining the Prime Minister's authority.

It is difficult to comprehend the personal recklessness and lack of political judgment involved. Joyce and Turnbull must — in every respect that matters — be strangers to each other.

There is no hint the pair or their offices workshopped the problem, examined the details or developed a management plan. Having stonewalled media inquiries during his by-election last year, Joyce announced his separation publicly in early December. In the subsequent two months neither he nor the Prime Minister's office organised a controlled announcement of his new circumstances.

Barnaby needed to have frank face-to-face meetings with Turnbull and his staff (insiders claim Joyce was not frank). The personal matters were for Barnaby to resolve but the professional issues about Campion's employment should have been agreed along with a communications strategy to reveal what was always going to become public knowledge.

The Deputy Prime Minister and leader of a socially conservative party, who had campaigned for traditional marriage and family values, had left his wife and was living with his former staff member who was now six months pregnant — yet nothing was done. Did they expect nobody would notice the baby at the next swearing-in ceremony at Yarralumla or family day at the Lodge? Did they think that ignoring media questions would curb journalists' curiosity? Were Joyce and Campion to spend the next two years as hermits?

It seems too naive to be true. Yet this is where it stood until Sharri Markson and *The Daily Telegraph* broke the story, complete with pictures of heavily pregnant Campion, less than a fortnight ago. For all the damage done, and all the nebulous issues about employment arrangements and undeclared free rent, a forthright revelation over summer about Joyce's changed circumstances and how his partner's employment had been managed arguably could have limited this to a two-day story, kept Joyce in his job and saved the government incalculable trauma.

Even as the situation unravelled this week there was little sign of co-ordination — the Prime Minister reduced to scrolling through his computer to check the register of members' interests while he was on his feet in question time. Then, when the sitting fortnight was done and the Deputy Prime Minister had been sent on leave — most likely to ponder his resignation in coming days — Turnbull reignited the story with a bonking ban. He tossed his deputy overboard, decrying how his “shocking error of judgment” had created a “world of woe” for his family and “appalled” the public while suggesting Joyce should “reflect” on his future.

The Deputy Prime Minister is not trusted to fill in as acting prime minister because he can't confidently show his face in public. His career is on the slide and the damage he has inflicted on the government could be terminal. Joyce would have been under pressure to resign before parliament returns on Monday week. But Turnbull publicly kicked him on the way out, prompting Joyce to dub his Prime Minister's intervention as “inept” and “unnecessary”. This is an unprecedented meltdown created by compounding errors.

The Joyce affair has sabotaged the government's political recovery, vandalised Turnbull's hopes of a Newspoll reprieve, destabilised the Coalition, increased the likelihood of a Shorten Labor administration and undermined his Prime Minister's authority. Obviously enough, in Coalition governments, the relationship between the two party leaders is the fulcrum on

which rests the competence and stability of the partnership. The shambolic way in which the Deputy Prime Minister's personal life has derailed federal politics raises questions about what, if any, relationship he has had with the Prime Minister. And whatever it was, it is in tatters now.

In his memoir, *Lazarus Rising*, John Howard included a photo with his deputy John Anderson on the campaign trail in the bush. In a telling caption, he wrote: "We trusted each other completely." This could never be said of Turnbull and Joyce, who represent opposite ends of the Coalition spectrum ideologically. They also have contrasting, even conflicting, styles. At times this has worked well for the government, Joyce's earthiness and social conservatism helping hold the conservative flank, especially in Queensland.

Where Tony Abbott and Joyce were too much of the same blokey, conservative club, Joyce has been a sunburnt sidekick and handy narrowcaster for Turnbull. Now he is more like a sunspot Turnbull needs to remove. They shared a beer in matching check shirts after Barnaby won his by-election in December but now the Prime Minister can't get far enough away. And coalitions can't work like that.

Battered, bruised and beleaguered, Barnaby's Nationals leadership is bust. He has been spurned by his Prime Minister and it is plain to see the only factor preventing his partyroom from ejecting him is its collective lack of spine and the lack of an obvious replacement.

Those Nationals MPs will be back in their electorates this weekend hearing first-hand disgust and despair about what has transpired. These conservative voters have had their patience tested by the gay marriage debate and the Coalition's climate change indulgences. Now the leader they admired has trashed their bedrock family values. It seems inconceivable his colleagues won't ask him to step aside. Yet the Nationals are so bereft of talent that whoever replaces Barnaby as leader will be virtually unknown to the broader public — after doing well at the last election, the party will suddenly be struggling for a profile.

So much damage will be done. The government's crucial hopes of appealing to Queensland Liberal National Party voters will be dashed. More conservative voters can be expected to drift to alternatives such as One Nation or Australian Conservatives.

The government will have lost one of its best retail advocates and a voice for policy sanity in areas such as energy and climate. Turnbull's administration has again looked confused and chaotic.

This was always the pressure point of Barnaby's baby: the moral judgments are nobody's business; there is no smoking gun when it comes to employment arrangements, ministerial codes or entitlements; but the fatal flaw has been the total absence of political awareness and management. The blame, while resting mainly with Joyce, is shared wider. But if the Deputy Prime Minister doesn't resign he will be risking the Prime Minister's neck to save his own.