



THE
Politics & Law
TEACHER

DEPTH STUDY

The Australian Prime Minister

The weakening of recent and contemporary Prime Ministers

Australia: "Coup capital of the democratic world"¹

Politics and Law Course References:

- Unit 3 - roles and powers of the Prime Minister, ~~Cabinet and the Ministry~~²

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¹ Nick Bryant, 'Australia: Coup Capital of the Democratic World', BBC News, 14 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-34249214> (accessed February 2018)

² Schools Curriculum and Standards Authority: Politics and Law Year Syllabus (effective from 1 January 2017)

The ascent of power

Patterns of power

The office of the Prime Minister of Australia is as old as federation. A historical overview of Prime Ministerial power provides an essential foundation for understanding the contemporary malaise that has beset the nation's highest office. A long view helps educators bring depth to their teaching as it deepens students' capacity for critical thinking.

The history of the Australian Prime Minister mirrors that of national power. It has been affected by political, economic and technological change. Despite its long history there are recurring patterns in Prime Ministerial power that help us make sense of the contemporary instability of the office.

Early limitations

The power of early Prime Ministers, as that of the national governments they led, was relatively weak before the great centralisation of power began gathering pace during and after the Second World War. Constitutional constraints on commonwealth legislative and financial power restricted the authority of early Prime Ministers. Most pre-War attempts at constitutional change were aimed at increasing the power of central government and, by implication, that of Prime Ministers. These attempts mostly failed.

Political parties had not yet emerged as the dominant forces that would provide their leaders with disciplined machines through which to control parliament. Even when they did, internal factionalism frustrated their leaders.

Westminster traditions imposed limitations. Prime Ministers of this era lacked the personalisation of power ("leader-centrism") that would become such a feature of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. Parliament was more assertive and executives didn't dominate the House of Representatives to the extent they would in later decades. Cabinet government, as opposed to "prime ministerial government" was the order of the day.

The earliest days were marked by instability and frequent change. Prime Ministers in the Depression-era 1930 were victims of external forces that limited the capacity to exercise power.

Priorities, parties and prosperity

The Second World War and its aftermath saw the office grow in power under Curtin, Chifley and Menzies. National emergency and national reconstruction provided both the need and the context for centralising power. As commonwealth power expanded through informal constitutional change and post-War economic growth the power and stature of Prime Ministers grew with it.

The two-party system matured as each major party drew loyal support from the large segments of the voting public. Disciplined mass parties provided post-War Prime Ministers from both sides with solid bases from which to obtain, maintain and project power. The capacity of Prime Ministers to dominate parliament through disciplined partisanship emerged and solidified, contributing to the decline of parliament relative to the executive.

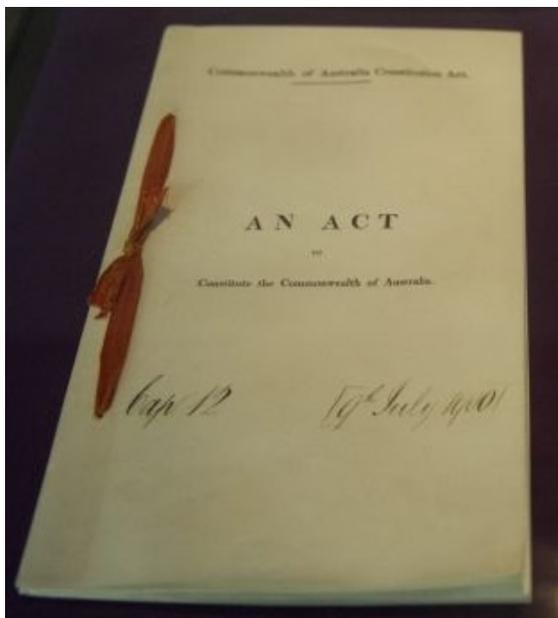


Figure 1: Commonwealth Constitution (Australia)³

Post-War prosperity provided the financial means by which national and thus Prime Ministerial power would be consolidated. Tax revenues grew as minerals and manufacturing came to dominate the economy through a long post-War boom. Thanks to High Court interpretations of the

constitution's financial powers, tax revenues increasingly flowed to the commonwealth and were at the disposal of Prime Ministerial influence and discretion.

Growth of "leader-centrism"

Media technologies enabled mass communication and an increasing focus on "the leader". Menzies mastered radio to reach millions of Australians, first with his "forgotten people" broadcast and then a 20 month radio campaign speaking directly to the Australian people before the 1949 election. Whitlam exploited television, opening with the ALP's "It's Time" 1972 election campaign advertisement and later with the first TV broadcast of parliament during its historic and only joint sitting. Whitlam was also the first Prime Minister to develop a strong Prime Minister's Office (PMO) staffed by policy advisors as a counterbalance to the Public Service, which he feared had become habituated to Coalition government during its 23 years of service to Menzies and his successors. All subsequent Prime Ministers have maintained a well-resourced PMO.

Fraser consolidated Whitlam's use of television and strengthened the PMO by bringing in policy experts to contest public service advice. He built the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) into a "policy powerhouse"⁴. The PMO and the

³ By Superegz (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

⁴ Strangio, P., Hart, P.t & Walter, J., 2017. *The pivot of power: Australian prime ministers and political leadership, 1949-2016*, Carlton, Victoria:

DPMC would provide him and his successors with unprecedented access to information, elevating the leader well above other ministers in terms of whole-of-government information.



Figure 2: New broadcast media intensified the focus of the leader, enhancing the personification of power.

Hawke, Keating and Howard inherited the resources created by Whitlam and Fraser and exploited television and radio even further. Hawke's dynamic ACTU leadership endowed him with a large public profile that made his ascension to power possible without a parliamentary apprenticeship. Keating's ruthless parliamentary and media performances enabled him to achieve an unlikely 1993

election victory. Howard skillfully reached his audiences through talk-back radio broadcasts and built an enduring relationship with his "battlers".

Growing expertise at the national level fighting a war of national survival helped the Curtin government build a powerful and expert public service. Implementing commonwealth nation-building projects as part of post-War reconstruction only increased its professionalism and administrative capacity. The advice and support of this great national institution benefited Prime Ministers who followed. Menzies famously relied on the "seven dwarfs"⁵ to advise him during his long tenure. Further, he could rely on the public service to deliver commonwealth programs competently, imbuing him and his government with an aura of competence and invincibility. Holt, Gorton and McMahon, although less impressive than the towering Menzies, drew heavily on the public service for expert advice.

National governments of this time possessed powerful "levers" to pull to implement policy. The power to fix wages and tariffs were two powers that enabled Prime Ministers to exert power over the economy. There were fewer international

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⁵ Figures such as Dr. H C "Nugget" Coombs as Head of the Reserve Bank and Sir Roland Wilson, Secretary to Treasury. Menzies cultivated very close relationships with highly capable public
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service heads. He sought and took their advice. A separate Prime Minister's Office, such a prominent feature of recent and contemporary Prime Ministers, was very small and consisted solely of secretarial and other support staff and lacked any political or policy "advisors".

agreements that limited national power. The international economic climate was also more benign. Post-War economic growth and the increasing size of a prosperous middle class consolidated the authority and respect of Prime Ministerial power.

The peak of power

Fraser had a dominating personality and sought to restore integrity to government after the Whitlam years. He consolidated the importance of the Prime Minister's Office by bringing in policy experts who could contest the advice of the public service and DPMC. He was the first Prime Minister to enjoy the rich source of "across government" information that would become a source of great strength to future Prime Ministers. He preferred cabinet to collectively make decisions but they were always his decisions, won in cabinet by force of argument and personality. Although his term is often dismissed as "wasted years" (he had control of both houses in the 1970s and early 1980s)⁶ he deserves credit for strengthening the office of the Prime Minister. He endowed his successors with a "leader-centred" role with a focus on personality and supported by broad and deep sources of information and advice.

Hawke, Keating and Howard marked the zenith of this era. Never had the office of

the Prime Minister been more powerful than under these leaders. They had the following "five pillars of power" at their disposal, each built up during post-War period:

- A rising tide of national power upon which rose the Prime Minister's power. This was the fruit of decades of centralisation through informal constitutional change;
- Disciplined political parties enjoying strong voter support – they were vehicles which delivered to Prime Ministers unprecedented power over parliament;
- A mass communications broadcast media that drew the public's focus to the leader – enabling the personification of power and weakening traditional Westminster cabinet government;
- A strong commonwealth public service. Central agencies such as Treasury provided key advice. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) provided strong across-government coordinating capacity and unparalleled access to information for the Prime Minister;
- An increasingly powerful Prime Minister's Office (PMO) staffed by policy and political advisors able to contest policy advice provided by DPMC and develop political

⁶ The wasted years of Mr. Fraser, <http://www.afr.com/opinion/editorials/the-wasted-years-of-mr-fraser-20150319-1m3lz7>
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[wasted-years-of-mr-fraser-20150319-1m3lz7](http://www.afr.com/opinion/editorials/the-wasted-years-of-mr-fraser-20150319-1m3lz7)
accessed 16 February 2018

strategy independently of Prime Ministers' parties.

A sixth pillar should be included. It is different from the others because it is a personal quality rather than a historical or institutional factor. It is:

- Personality. Effective leadership and communication styles were shared by the three Prime Ministers noted above. They were all different of course, but all shared a capacity to work with cabinet and backbench colleagues and to communicate through the broadcast media.

The three Prime Ministers above used their historical and institutional inheritance in different ways tempered by their personalities.

Hawke was personally popular and a consummate relationship and consensus builder. Keating was an articulate advocate for reform with an ability to communicate complex ideas in simple terms. He was never as popular as Hawke but earned respect through competence and his record as Treasurer under Hawke. Howard had a gift of talking to the Australian people and connecting with them directly, developing an entirely new class of ex-ALP supporters dubbed "Howard's battlers". He enjoyed immense stature within the Liberal Party. All three inspired their cabinet and party colleagues.

Each was fortunate to enjoy the support of competent cabinet colleagues. They were also blessed with an international environment that, despite serious challenges, could mostly be managed in their own interests.

Hawke falls in the category of "deposed leader". Despite this his record is one of achievement and success. He won three elections, achieved great reforms and served from 1983 to 1991 – the third longest term in Prime Ministerial history.

Factors diminishing recent and contemporary Prime Ministers' power

The following analysis is based on Strangio, 't Hart and Walter's (2017) evaluation of the office of Prime Minister since 1949.

The PMO

Since Whitlam's time the PMO has grown increasingly powerful as a source of advice to the Prime Minister. It has become a rival to the DPMC and a filter through which public service advice must pass. The character of recent PMOs has become increasingly dominated by political short-termism and personal loyalty to the Prime Minister. The result is increasing isolation of Prime Ministers from their colleagues and the public service. A fatal consequence is alienation from cabinet and party colleagues and lack of effective policy development. Rudd and Abbott suffered the most from this factor.

Media

The news-cycle has sped up to the point of demanding “announcables” from the Prime Minister on almost daily basis. The sped has incentivized “leader-centrism” and poor policy development and led to unrealistic expectations of Prime Ministerial capacity. Public disappointment is reflected in poor polling, which undermines a Prime Minister’s power.

Being media-savvy has become an essential trait for any Prime Minister. Rudd was a master media performer but focused too much on the message and too little on the delivery. Abbott was unable to connect to mainstream voters and could not explain his need to break election promises in the disastrous 2014 budget. Gillard could not explain complex policy and catastrophically described her government’s “Carbon Pricing Mechanism” as a “carbon tax”. She relied on successful policy like the NDIS to speak for itself rather than sell her successes.

The fragmentation of media audiences caused by social media and “narrowcasting” has deprived all Prime Ministers of the capacity to communicate a coherent message to the bulk of mainstream voters. Narrowcasting results in “echo-chambers” with news consumers only hearing stories that reinforce their political biases. Prime Ministers find it difficult to speak to those who will not listen. This has diminished one of the

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Prime Minister’s greatest sources of past strength – the broadcast media.

Diminishing national power

Globalisation, free trade deals with other countries, the growth of international law and changing global economic circumstances all affect the power of the commonwealth and this its chief executive office, the Prime Minister.

In the past, governments had many more “levers to pull” to manage the economy and control policy. Today, the growth of an integrated world economy, competition with low-wage countries and the ability of transnational corporations to excise power through free trade agreements and the courts limit the power of national governments. Australia’s commodity oriented economy is vulnerable to mineral and energy market booms and busts affecting national finances and government power. Global economic shocks ripple through the Australian economy with national governments judged by their decreasing ability to respond to them. These factors mean that modern federal governments and Prime Ministers simply cannot exert the same level of national control as their predecessors.

Declining major party support and electoral fragmentation

The trend towards declining faith in politicians and the two major parties results in diminishing majorities in the

House of Representatives and the rise of minor and micro party power in the Senate.

Weak and unstable house majorities and diverse Senates will critically diminish the power of any Prime Minister unable to manage disparate sources of support.

Another effect is a growing volatility in the electorate reinforced by media “echo chambers”. New media narrowcasting enables political participation by individuals and groups who would have lacked the resources to campaign and influence elections in the past. Today, many voices compete on more equal terms for the attention of voters and grievances can more easily be exploited against a sitting Prime Minister.

Executive dominance of the parliament has been such a feature of Australian political history that is almost taken for granted. We may be entering an era of weak governments characterised by slim majorities, minority government and dependence on coalitions and alliances to form majorities. These weakened governments will face an increasingly diverse and fragmented Senate with a cross-bench playing populist politics to angry constituents.

Ideological exhaustion

Since the 1980s the “Washington Consensus”, a philosophy that market-centred economic policies were the key to increasing prosperity for all has dominated
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both the moderate left and right of the political spectrum across the democratic world. The collapse of the Soviet Union discredited left-wing ideologies such as democratic socialism and led most parties of the left, including the ALP, to adopt neo-liberal ideas. Hawke led the way in Australia and Howard continued but tempered the ideology with politically clever welfare reforms.

The Global Financial Crisis has been interpreted by many, including Kevin Rudd who wrote a lengthy essay on the subject, as demonstrating that neo-liberalism has failed to achieve stable economic growth and prosperity for everyone. Persistent low growth since 2008 and growing inequality have led many voters to question neo-liberal orthodoxy and react negatively against governments and Prime Ministers who advocate “more of the same”. Abbott’s austere 2014 budget was instrumental in his downfall. Turnbull’s \$50bn company tax cuts seem to be unpopular for the same reason. Both are examples of neo-liberal remedies that are increasing unpopular with voters if not discredited even among economists. It seems likely that until major parties reform neo-liberalism or discover a new narrative they will continue to lack credibility in an electorate suffering stagnant wage growth, inequality and growing job insecurity. Prime Ministers’ advocacy based on neo-liberal arguments will not

connect to the electorate as powerfully as in the past.

Measuring Prime Ministers' authority

The increasingly "leader-centred" nature of the office of the Prime Minister has shifted the way the authority of a Prime Minister is measured by both the media and electorate. Past Prime Ministers enjoyed a strong measure of authority simply from being the Prime Minister. Strangio et al (2017) describe this as "institutional authority". Institutional authority insulated Prime Ministers from being evaluated on the basis of personality and cemented their position within party and cabinet more solidly.

The change to a "leader-centred" form of "prime ministerial government" (sometimes referred to as "presidential" in style) has altered the way Prime Ministers' authority is judged. In recent times the performance of the Prime Minister is critical. Strangio et al (2017) describe this as "performative authority". Performance can be fickle – Prime Ministers may be judged on how they communicate and connect. They may be judged on policy outcomes. They may be judged on relationships with colleagues or how they handle a crisis. They are assessed on their "authenticity". Scandals or dysfunction in government will affect their "performative

authority". Constant media scrutiny only "feeds the beast".

Rudd was judged harshly when he abandoned climate change policy, damaging his authenticity. Gillard was judged harshly over the carbon tax. Abbott failed to communicate an understanding of modern Australia. Turnbull has been judged as ineffective in achieving policy goals and lacking authenticity.

The modern Prime Ministership

Recent history suggests that Prime Ministerial power has passed its peak. There is a contemporary crisis of political leadership not just in government but also in opposition. Changing political leaders has become such a characteristic of recent Australian political history that teachers and students of Politics and Law may be inclined to agree with the view expressed by Nick Bryan at the beginning of this depth study.

Strangio, 't Hart and Walter (2017)⁷ have argued that there are multiple causes for the decline of Prime Ministerial power in recent and contemporary Australia. Among these they note;

- the rise of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) as a rival to a diminished public service;

⁷ Strangio, P., Hart, P.t & Walter, J., 2017. *The pivot of power: Australian prime ministers and political leadership, 1949-2016*, Carlton, Victoria: Topic Depth Study Number 1 2018
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- changing media resulting in a leader-centred and fast-paced political climate with increasing “narrowcasting”, rather than broadcasting, resulting in the fragmentation of the political audience;
- unrealistic expectations of Prime Ministers caused by the fast-pace of the news cycle and the need for “announcables” to satisfy the media;
- declining national power in the face of globalisation and challenging external economic forces, reducing the power of national governments and their leaders to address major issues;
- declining major party voter support and a corresponding fragmentation of an increasingly volatile electorate;
- the exhaustion of neo-liberalism as the defining ideology for both major parties since the early 1980s; and
- a shift from “institutional authority” to “performative authority” as the measure of success for a Prime Minister.

These factors represent a weakening of the five pillars of power described above. Further, the sixth pillar – personality – has

failed recent leaders. Rudd was a presidential micromanager whose hyper-controlling style alienated his cabinet and party colleagues leading to chaos and dysfunction. Gillard lacked legitimacy because of the manner of her coming to power followed by her leadership of a minority government. She was also a weak media performer and struggled to deal with an effective opposition and a bitter rival. Abbott was combative and prone to making out of touch decisions without consulting colleagues. All three were ultimately judged harshly by the people in opinion polls which undermined their parties’ confidence in them. Turnbull appeared to lack authority within his party and to suffer poor political judgement, calling a double dissolution election that resulted in the loss of Abbott’s strong majority and installing an even more fractious Senate.

Tiffin⁸ notes that no other parliamentary democracy has anything like Australia’s record of deposing political leaders, with 16 at the national level since 1970. He claims that Australia has entered an era characterised by the “doctrine of the disposable leader” (Tiffin 2017, p225). He invokes similar causes to explain the demise of Prime Ministerial power – leader-centred electioneering, leader-centred news, leader-centred parties and

⁸Tiffin, Rodney. *Disposable leaders: media and leadership coups from Menzies to Abbott*. Sydney, N.S.W.: New South Publishing, 2017.

governments and the idea of “changing leader as a cure-all”.

In the view, of Strangio et al (2017), two extremes characterise recent Prime Ministerial history:

1. “extreme personality”; and
2. “extreme contingency”

The two extremes can help explain the declining power of the office of Prime Minister under Rudd, Gillard and Abbott. (Strangio et al 2017).

Extreme personality v extreme contingency

Rudd and Abbott: extreme personality
Strangio et al (2017) classify Rudd and Abbott as Prime Ministers weakened by “extreme personality”. Both were highly presidential in style, relying on themselves and disregarding cabinet and party colleagues to the point that they alienated their supporters.

Both Rudd and Abbott won sizable majorities giving them strong control of the lower house. Their terms were not diminished by the long-term trend towards declining major party support.

⁹ By Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website – www.dfat.gov.au [CC BY 3.0 au (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/deed.en>)], via Wikimedia Commons

¹⁰ Rudd’s PMO contained appointments such as 29 year old chief of staff Alistair Jordan who had no
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Dangerously, they concluded that they had personally delivered their parties into government and had earned a strong personal mandate, entitling them to a command style leadership. These factors enhanced the “extreme personality” factor inherent in each Prime Minister.



Figure 3: Kevin Rudd⁹

In both cases an over-powerful and inexperienced PMO, staffed by handpicked young-guns and political “warriors” acted as gatekeepers resulting in the isolation of their “presidential” Prime Ministers from cabinet ministers and public service advice¹⁰. Ministers felt sidelined and

public service experience, Andrew Charlton (chief economic advisor) and Lachlan Harris (director of communications) – both under 30. Abbott’s PMO was dominated by his chief of staff, Peta Credilin who Abbott described as “the smartest and fiercest political warrior I’ve ever worked with”.

inferior to inexperienced PMO advisors who had no accountability to party or parliament and who prioritised loyalty to the Prime Minister over policy. The PMOs of Rudd and Abbott enabled a their command and control style of Prime Ministerial leadership. In Rudd’s case it proved chaotic and dysfunctional as the complexity of government and external crises like the GFC and the failure of the Copenhagen Climate Conference overtook the government. In Abbott’s case, the chief of staff, Peta Credlin, became a “proxy for the Prime Minister”, who became increasingly detached and out of touch¹¹.



Figure 4: Tony Abbott¹²

Both PMOs were characterised by personal loyalty to the PM and short term focus on political objectives rather than long term policy. By contrast, Howard’s PMO chief of staff was Arthur Sinodinos, who had significant public service experience.

Years of public service reform starting in the 1990s, including outsourcing much of its administrative capacity and reducing the independence of its leadership (the Senior Executive Service) had gutted the public service of much of its policy development capacity and its ability to give quality advice. As with ministers, the DPMC and key central departments within the public service found it difficult to provide advice that was not contested by the PMO. The provision of “frank and fearless” advice, such a critical feature of the Westminster system, was often frustrated by the influence of Rudd and Abbott’s policy-inexperienced PMOs with their focus on short-term political outcomes and, in the case of Rudd’s PMO, media management.

Gillard and Turnbull: extreme contingency

Strangio et al (2017) classify Gillard as a Prime Minister weakened by “extreme contingency”. In terms of personality Gillard was highly consultative and developed strengths such as negotiation skills, effective cabinet processes and good relationships with colleagues. These personal qualities are usually associated with a successful Prime Minister such as

¹¹ Patrick, Aaron. *Credlin & Co.: How the Abbott Government Destroyed Itself*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2016

¹² By Foreign and Commonwealth Office [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

John Howard. However, the circumstances by which she came to power, her minority government, economic constraints imposed by the GFC, a bitter rival within her cabinet and the viciousness of media attacks against her undermined her as Prime Minister. Consistently low polling imposed a further limit on her durability in office. Media and later public attitudes to her gender may also have been a factor. These external contingencies eventually overwhelmed her.



Figure 5: Julia Gillard¹³

Turnbull may also be classified as a Prime Minister limited by “extreme contingency”. Like Gillard he possesses the personal qualities of a successful Prime Minister and promised a return to “cabinet government” rather than “prime

¹³ By *MystifyMe Concert Photography (Troy) (Prime Minister Julia Gillard (25))* [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via *Wikimedia Commons*

ministerial government”. But, also like Gillard, the manner of his coming power and a bitter rival within his party imposed contingencies on his power. Further, he is ideologically out of sync with the Liberal Party he leads and suffers constraints imposed by the conditions he accepted to gain the leadership – essentially a deal with the social and economic conservatives within his party that prevents him from being the “progressive Liberal Prime Minister” that the majority of the electorate seem to want him to be. His popularity plummeted. Turnbull’s failure to win a strong majority in the 2016 double dissolution election has also imposed a contingency similar to Gillard’s minority government predicament – his grip on the House is weak.



Figure 6: Malcolm Turnbull¹⁴

¹⁴ By *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website – www.dfat.gov.au* [CC BY 3.0 au]

Section 44 of the Constitution has undermined his power base further by depriving him of Liberal and National Party MHRs and rendering his hold on the House of Representatives even more tenuous. The double dissolution election, by reducing the quota required for a Senate place, has resulted in an fractious Senate itself subject to Section 44 instability. Dealing with the Senate is a contingency faced by all Prime Ministers but in Turnbull's case the Senate of the 45th parliament is especially limiting.

Turnbull's relationship with junior Coalition partner, the National Party, has become strained in the wake of the Barnaby Joyce scandal which engulfed the Turnbull Government in February 2018. Turnbull's public criticism of Joyce was tantamount to a call for his resignation. At the time of writing the issue was not resolved. If Joyce refuses to resign and survives the scandal it will weaken Turnbull's authority. Liberal Party Prime Ministers always face the constraints of leading a coalition, which is an external contingency they must navigate for success.

In both Gillard and Turnbull we see potentially successful Prime Ministers compromised by external contingencies

that have conspired to undermine their power.

Summing up

"Leader-centrism", a term which might encompass much of Tiffin's thesis, is the malaise at heart of the current weakness of the office of Prime Minister. Leader-centrism was born during the Menzies's era, strongly established by Whitlam, consolidated in the Hawke, Keating and Howard era before becoming a source of weakness in recent history.

Other factors have made leader-centrism toxic. Constant demands for rushed policy announcements, fragmented communication, defensive and inexperienced PMOs, diminished public service capacity, weakened and divided major parties, reduced national government power and a collapse of institutional authority have all combined to permanently reshape the nature of the office of the Australian Prime Minister. In many ways it is "back to the future". We may see a return to the relatively weakened and unstable Prime Ministers that characterised Australia's early political history.

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