

Sick of the Trench Warfare: Turnbull's Chance for Meaningful Debate

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On Saturday, on the eve of his elevation to the ministry, Senator Simon Birmingham was on Geraldine Doogue's Saturday Extra program explaining the government's changes in vocational education and training.

The discussion was civilised and courteous.

Birmingham showed that he had been on top of his responsibilities as Assistant Minister for Education and Training. He explained how funding anomalies and inconsistencies had arisen, and how these distortions had lured students into inappropriate courses while other courses were underfunded.

He gave credit to the Keating Government for having tried similar reforms, while criticising the Goss Government in Queensland (having a dig at Kevin Rudd who at that stage was head of the Cabinet Unit in that government).

He was critical of the education unions, but he acknowledged their legitimate interest and expressed a hope that he could work with them.

It was a discussion likely to engender respect for Birmingham as an individual and for the government he represents, even among those who disagree with his policies.

Will he be able to maintain that approach? Or will the old order be re-established, with the prime minister's office directing ministers to use dumbed-down and patronising "speaking notes", with the compulsory final words about "the mess we inherited from Labor" (one of Cormann's favourite put-downs), and stupid claims about "creating 300,000 jobs"?

Some may say that in trying to be reasonable, Birmingham is naive. Does he not realise that politics is about total warfare, with only one winner and one loser – a "zero sum" game? All tactics, even blatant lies, can be employed.

I suggest that Birmingham's approach is on the right track, but any minister faces pressures to be more aggressive. Australian politics has always been robust, and Abbott, with his relentless attacks on Labor, elevated the conflict to new levels. He saw Labor not as a rival, but as an enemy to be destroyed by whatever means were at hand.

That approach may have put Abbott into the top job, but at a terrible cost. Anything the Labor Government did had to be undone, even to the extent of going against the Liberal Party's own principles. Most notably a market-based approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions had to be abandoned in favour of the high-cost high-intervention "direct action" plan.

Sensible approaches to closing the budget deficit, such as taxing "self-funded" retirees and shutting off company car rofts, were out of the question because they had been "Labor" ideas.

The longer-term problem with the combative model is that politics is not a "zero sum" game: rather it is a "negative sum" game.

In the fight, the combatants inflict damage on each other, and in doing so they bring the whole political process into disrepute. Hence the growing cynicism, particularly among young people, about the capacity of our political institutions to address pressing problems – climate change, widening inequality, inadequate public revenue to fund health and education, ramshackle transport and communication infrastructure and declining competitiveness, to name some of the main problems Australia faces.

Liberal politicians, who claim to understand business, should be particularly mindful of the stupidity of the combative model.

Firms compete with their rivals, and strive to demonstrate the superiority of their products, but they don't try to trash their competitors.

It's not that they're nice guys. Rather, it's because they realize that trashing their rivals would run the risk of trashing the whole industry.

BMW does not suggest Mercedes Benz cars are badly made, because to do so would damage the German luxury car market. Coles does not say people who shop at Woolworths are fools, lest they head off to Aldi or Costco. And Qantas does not tell the world that their corporate objective is to put Virgin out of business – people want to know what Qantas offers, and would not welcome a monopoly airline.

Yet politicians engage in all these behaviours. Liberal and National Party politicians are particularly prone to describing their *raison d'être* in terms of “keeping Labor out of office” – an arrogance that is hardly going to win over any wavering voters.

Even on the night Turnbull won the leadership ballot, his deputy, Julie Bishop, couldn't resist a cheap shot at Labor, saying: “I thank Tony Abbott for his service as the leader of our party and particularly for the effort that he put in at the 2013 election when the Australian people knew they could not afford another moment under the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd government.”

There was no need for that snide comment. It was meaningless, and offensive to the 47 percent of Australians who wanted Labor to stay in office, and to others who were soon to realize that they had made a poor choice in electing a Coalition headed by Tony Abbott.

Had she felt compelled to say something critical of Labor she surely could have mentioned some specific point of real differentiation between Labor and the newly minted Turnbull-Bishop Liberal Party.

Turnbull and his newly-appointed ministers need reminding that Abbott's unrelenting war against Labor, displaying contempt for the electorate's intelligence, rendered the Coalition under his leadership unelectable.

Turnbull has a chance to turn that around, and, going by his rhetoric, seems to understand how to do that.

He could do worse than to require all ministers to take the approach Birmingham did in that interview – to treat voters and his political rivals with respect. That doesn't mean they should refrain from criticising Labor and other parties, but such criticism should be grounded in reason and facts rather than lies, misrepresentations and sweeping generalisations.

If, however, ministers are directed to use dumbed-down speaking notes, and to conclude media appearances with puerile anti-Labor barbs, then Turnbull's ascension will have been no more than a change in the jockey on the same old embittered nag, to borrow from John Hewson's warning earlier this year about the need for Liberal Party politicians to lift their standards above undergraduate student politics.