

## Some Glittering Prizes and Brilliant Careers

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**A**fter six years, Malcolm Bligh Turnbull yesterday abandoned his ambitions for Australia's top political position, announcing his intention to relinquish the Sydney seat of Wentworth. For a while, when his recent offer to return to the front bench was rebuffed, it seemed he might continue a Costello-esque role quietly leaking from the back bench his many differences with new Liberal leader, Tony Abbott. But whatever one might think of Turnbull – and opinions are sharply divided – he was never one to tolerate indefinitely the constantly shifting policy sand dunes which constitute Australian politics.

Turnbull's entry to Parliament had seemed a natural evolution following a lucrative and often controversial career portfolio. His legal triumph as a young barrister, when he humiliated the British government and its secret intelligence community in the 'Spycatcher' case, marked him as someone to watch. His move to the corporate world of investment banking and insurance consolidated both his bank account and an abrasive business reputation. His leadership of the Australian republican movement was criticised for its eventual failure (perhaps unfairly, in a country where social and constitutional referenda have virtually no chance of success). It also earned him the lasting enmity of the Liberal Party's self-proclaimed elder statesman, John Howard, whom Turnbull described at the time as the man who broke the nation's heart. For all his public posturing as the jovial, wise old owl of conservatism, Howard hates with a vengeance and never forgets. Howard built a career on changing his mind and it's hard to imagine two men with less in common. It was Howard, behind his own closed suburban doors, who would eventually engineer Turnbull's eclipse with the soon-to-retire Nick Minchin and others.

Turnbull's entry into politics was equally controversial. His pre-selection battle with the popular incumbent, Peter King, was ugly to watch and went as near as makes no difference to branch-stacking. Effectively, Wentworth was purchased. For a man with loudly proclaimed progressive ethics, the reversion to 19<sup>th</sup> century 'rotten borough' tactics was an inauspicious start to the distinguished Parliamentary career promised by his supporters. But it worked and, through sheer talent, Turnbull soon forced his way onto Howard's front bench as Minister for Environment & Water Resources where he did worthwhile and lasting work.

After Howard lost the 2007 election, and his own seat, the leadership passed to Brendan Nelson, a principled and honourable man whom Turnbull undermined almost from the moment of Nelson's four vote victory. Politically challenged in terms of nous and ruthlessness, Nelson is nonetheless cited (on [openaustralia.org](http://openaustralia.org)) as a politician whose speeches could be understood by the average 19 year old, according to the 'Flesch-Kincaid' scoring system, which must say something. But it was only a matter of time. Nelson's principles gave way to Turnbull's, whose strength of character and early capacity to unsettle prime minister Kevin Rudd held for a while the promise of uniting party divisions, despite a perception of arrogance and lack of party room consultation. Sydney Morning Herald columnist, Paul Sheehan, often an editorial front runner, was the first to criticise Turnbull, accusing him at this time of transforming the Liberals from a political party into a platform for personal ambition and noting with distaste his treatment of Nelson.

After several inglorious and badly researched Parliamentary errors it was an irony that Turnbull, too, became a victim of his own philosophy in a party with a short attention span on principle. His reasoned and uncompromising support for the government's carbon trading position saw him off. Turnbull and Nelson were both seen as men of the left in a party which likes to describe itself as a "broad church" but which had already been brutally transformed by Howard from the conservative into the actively reactionary.

Turnbull leaves politics on his own terms and he'll be back. On balance, although there was much about his approach and demeanour which rankled, his political courage should not be overlooked. He represents a net loss to Australian politics, if only for a sense of duty in sticking to his principles. But the fact that he merits praise for something like this, which ought to be taken for granted and which on all sides of politics is now a discarded and irrelevant value, makes its own sorry statement.