

# Addendum

## No sign of fun fair moving on

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ADDENDUM



In the political fun fair, with its clowns and rollercoaster ride, Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull quickly had designs on being the star of the show.

It was with a “roll up, roll up” hubris that he spruiked his story around the press gallery: this was a scoop that could topple a prime minister or a treasurer, it appeared.

But the smoke and mirrors have dispersed on the OzCar affair and Turnbull’s been left under the spotlight of public opinion, with some Liberal Party colleagues also said to be aghast at their leader’s performance.

It all began dramatically enough. The man who has admitted his prepolitics meeting with Australian Broadcasting Tribunal chairman Peter Westerway in a darkened Sydney street in 1991 to hand over documents designed to smear Kerry Packer, has allegedly held recent secret meetings with senior Treasury official Godwin Grech to smear the Government.

Decades ago he managed to scupper Packer’s plans to bid for the Fairfax media group, so this time around he may have thought he’d bring down another powerful man and be ringmaster soon enough.

According to Grech, after all, there was an email that linked the Prime Minister to efforts to extract favours from Treasury for car dealer John Grant, who had once given Kevin Rudd a ute for electoral use.

Grech tabled the information, it has been said, in liaisons with Turnbull and Senator Eric Abetz. A long-time Liberal Party sympathiser, he may have been leaking information for 18 months.

In a Senate committee meeting last week, Abetz raised the matter of the email, saying he’d been told of it by a journalist. Grech replied, “My recollection may well be totally false or faulty, but my recollection – and it is a big qualification – but my recollection is that there was a short email from the [Prime Minister’s office] to me which very simply alerted me to the case of John Grant, but I do not have that email.”

Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan denied in Parliament there was any special treatment.

And so it was that the show dubbed the OzCar affair exploded into column inches and broadcast bulletins.

Turnbull decried, “The Prime Minister and the Treasurer abused their offices and taxpayers’ resources to seek advantage for one of their mates and then lied about it to the Parliament.”

“A shocking abuse of power and a betrayal of public trust,” he trumpeted.

“If the Prime Minister and Treasurer cannot immediately justify their action . . . they have no choice but to resign.”

A fragile-looking Grech, who was apparently shaken by the attention,



received a voicemail message from Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey, his boss for a short time a decade ago, which helpfully said, “I hope you’re okay, take care of yourself.”

It must have been quite the scene, therefore, when Turnbull was told the police had found the email to be a fake. It had been created within Treasury, sent to Grech’s home account, then deleted from the department’s system.

“The case that Mr Rudd misled the house about the communication is not sustained,” Turnbull conceded to ABC Radio’s AM. “There is no doubt about that.”

But in a display of remarkable fortitude, he absolved his party of responsibility and kept up the act.

“It was not created or composed by us. If it is a fake, as is apparently the case, it was a fake that was created in the Treasury,” he said.

“Now how on earth can I be responsible for a fake that is created in Mr Swan’s Department?”

With Grech admitted to a Canberra hospital this week, an Australian Federal Police investigation going on into the origins of the email

and other leaks, Abetz facing claims he misled the committee, and Turnbull being scrutinised for any misconduct of his own, the Opposition Leader probably isn’t having very much fun any more.

The Treasurer said of him, “He went out there to smear the Prime Minister and myself on a baseless email which he had been peddling around this building for weeks, peddling it around the business community.”

Speaking of the “tawdry forged email affair”, Rudd said the Opposition Leader must resign because “his integrity has been shattered”.

Nary can Turnbull complain, though, because he was the one to adopt a form of politicking with little favour these days in the community. Approaching the House as a sideshow-alley shooting gallery, where opponents could be picked off one by one, he chose to focus on the politicians not the policies. It’s an uncomfortable reprisal of dirty politics.

He was perhaps emboldened by the June resignation of Defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon for being implicated in helping his brother’s

business get access to senior officials in his department, or maybe excited by the British Government’s hemorrhaging of numbers over a public monies scandal.

The electorate, for what it’s worth, was probably not as animated by it all as he, and could be forgiven for some cynicism given the previous Liberal government’s checkered approach to ministerial standards.

Then prime minister John Howard introduced his Code of Ministerial Conduct, which required ministers to divest shareholdings, and saw his government shed seven ministers from 1996 to 1997, before he decided they didn’t need to divest any more.

He went on to defend ministers such as foreign minister Alexander Downer and deputy prime minister Mark Vaile over the Australian Wheat Board scandal, and defence minister Peter Reith over the children overboard affair, until 2007 when the jobs of senators Santo Santoro and Ian Campbell were claimed.

Rather than providing a lesson in political strategy it was Senator Campbell’s sacking that should have proved prophetic to Turnbull.

That smear campaign began when Howard tried to discredit Rudd over three meetings the then opposition leader had with disgraced former West Australian premier Brian Burke, who’d been jailed in the 1990s for abusing travel expenses.

Then-treasurer Peter Costello described anyone dealing with Burke as “politically and morally compromised” and the health minister Tony Abbott proclaimed that Rudd had been “exposed as someone who is prepared to sup with the devil”.

It backfired when the hapless Campbell was shown to have met with Burke in 2005. And so he ignominiously became the first Howard minister to be sacked in 10 years.

Which brings us back to Turnbull now that his campaign has backfired too. Under questioning in Parliament and by journalists, Turnbull has refused to comment on reports that he and Abetz met with Grech prior to the controversial Senate hearing. Turnbull’s office has said the matter is under police investigation and he won’t be commenting. Turnbull and Abetz have said they do not disclose sources. While on ABC1’s *The 7.30 Report*, Turnbull invoked parliamentary privilege.

At this point, therefore, it appears he’s wishing the fun fair would pack up its freaks and caravans and head out of town.

They may be doing just that, in a manner of speaking, with Parliament breaking for the six-week-long winter recess. Even still, it does seem that this is a show that must go on.



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