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History of regicide can shed light on Turnbull's downfall

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Illustration: Sturt Krygsman

With Australians scratching their heads and wondering what that was all about, Shakespeare's dictum, "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" has received a solid workout in the public debate.

But however acute the Bard's psychological insight may have been, his generalisation was hardly historically accurate.

There have been, after all, 40 English monarchs since William the Conqueror crossed the channel in 1066. Of those, only six have been killed by deliberate acts of their subjects.

And at least until Louis XVI went to the guillotine in 1793, the French looked on the English as anarchists: of the more than 30 kings of France who reigned between the founding of the Capetian monarchy in AD987 and the French Revolution, none was deposed and only two were murdered — in each case by a lone killer, with both kings being immediately replaced by their legitimate heirs.

Indeed, if anything was remarkable it was how long European monarchs survived, even when they were unquestionably inept.

Charles VI of France may have been known as “Charles the Beloved”, but he believed he was made of glass and periodically ran amok, wailing that he was being pursued by enemies intent on shattering him. That didn't stop him reigning for 42 years and dying in his bed.

As for “Joanna the Mad” of Spain, she earned her sobriquet by refusing to accept that her husband's cherished corpse was indeed a corpse, while Henry VI of England could not speak coherently, much less secure victory in his military adventures. Their subjects nonetheless tolerated them for years or even decades.

Overall, the violent death rate for European monarchs was extremely low by the standards of their times. According to Cambridge University's John Morrill, of the 200 or so kings and queens who reigned in the Latin West from the late 13th century to the end of the 18th century, only 7 per cent were assassinated, while a handful died in battle. By comparison, almost a quarter of the higher male nobility perished through acts of violence.

The top of the tree was, in other words, by far the safest place to be.

In part that was because regicide was so obviously sacrilegious. In those God-fearing times, the prospect of being tortured everlastingly for disposing of a divinely anointed monarch would have weighed on even the bloodthirstiest rival.

However, it was not only concern for their immortal soul that deterred potential regicides; it was also the fear of unleashing a process of serial killing.

Regicides, it was well known, came in waves: of the six English monarchs who were murdered, five died in the period between 1327 and 1485.

Nor was it surprising that one regicide led to another: whoever obtained the throne by regicide lacked legitimacy; the demonstration effect of the original regicide invited encores; and living in fear of dying by the sword, the regicide king was likelier to focus on self-preservation than on effective rule, provoking the fate he sought to avoid.

Kingdoms in which monarchs were deposed therefore suffered what the Russians famously called a “Time of Troubles”. And just as Russia’s 17th-century Time of Troubles brought unprecedented chaos, savagery and strife, so regicide kingdoms reeled under what many viewed as divine punishment, until an exceptionally ruthless leader seized control.

Of course, the fact that instability breeds instability was not rendered obsolete by the traditional order’s disappearance. On the contrary, in *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), Samuel Huntington demonstrated the degree to which political turmoil, once under way, can persist, even in the modern world.

But while most scholars had considered instability merely a developmental stage, Huntington brilliantly diagnosed its determinants.

To work effectively, he argued, political institutions need a relatively high degree of insulation from immediate social pressures, with structured processes that constrain the demands of competing groups. But even where those structured processes exist, they come under strain and may break down when new forms of social mobilisation arise, increasing the urgency of political demands, expanding the range of issues on the political agenda and raising the stakes in the political contest. As that happens, political institutions become overloaded, and instead of undertaking their function “of making the community more of a community” by “creating public interests” — that is, shared goals and meanings — they subvert it.

Much as in the Rome of Julius Caesar, “the general politicisation of social forces and institutions” culminates in what Huntington called “praetorianism”, where narrow cliques, whipping their supporters into a polarised frenzy, can overthrow each other but cannot themselves deliver the stability they so successfully deny to others.

Although Huntington's concept of praetorianism was developed for polities grappling with modernisation, longstanding democracies have experienced it too, as those who lived through the political crisis that swept the advanced economies in the 1970s well know.

That crisis had many causes, but none was more important than "the general politicisation of social forces and institutions", Huntington stressed. As they buckled to one pressure group after the other, governments discovered that with handouts — as with lust, avarice and the love of power — *l'appetit vient en mangeant* (hunger grows as one eats), fuelling a vortex.

The crisis was quelled only when leaders ranging from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher on the Centre-Right to Paul Keating, New Zealand's Roger Douglas and Sweden's Kjell-Olof Feldt on the Centre-Left recognised that governments were being asked to do too much. Rolling back the demands, as they did, could not eliminate the problems but it brought a lengthy respite.

None of that is to deny the complexity of the factors that since 2007 have transformed Australia into the Italy of the south. And yes, personalities have mattered, with the cast of characters reminiscent of Shakespeare's magnificent hyphenated adjectives: dog-hearted, milk-livered, hell-black, shrill-gorged and lust-dieted, which all appear within a few pages of that tragedy of hubris and betrayal, *King Lear*.

But structural factors matter too; and as rent-seekers rampage through Canberra in great troops like foraging baboons, we should remember Aristotle's observation: "The less the area of his prerogative, the longer will the authority of a king last unimpaired." For so long as our political class claims that governments can sate every thirst, soothe every pain and solve every woe, electorates will swing between unrealistic hope and undue disappointment, perpetuating the cycle of instability.

Of course, to all but the saints (who scarcely need them), the lessons of history are totally unavailing. So don't expect sanity to break out anytime soon. Rather, as the great John Ashbery put it in *Laughing Gravy*: "The crisis has just passed. / Uh oh, here it comes again ..."