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Spirit of Ajax won't help Liberals

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Watching Malcolm Turnbull's recent conduct, it was hard not to think of Enoch Powell's famous conclusion to his biography of Joseph Chamberlain. "All political lives," Powell wrote, "unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and human affairs."

No less relevant, however, was the less widely cited observation Powell added. While some, he said, fall like Achilles, the careers of others, including Chamberlain, end "in the pathos of Ajax".

Achilles, of course, died a hero. But Ajax, humiliated by Agamemnon — who, instead of giving him Achilles' armour, gave it to Odysseus — went mad with rage.

Consumed by the desire for revenge, Ajax managed to disgrace himself, shredding his good name and betraying the companions to whom he owed his glory.

Powell's point was that politics, like war, has its terrible injustices: it was not entirely unreasonable of Ajax to believe that he had been grievously wronged.

But even in the face of those injustices, politics demands loyalty, for without it the reversals that scar every human endeavour would unleash a frenzy of defections, destroying the co-operation on which success depends. And whether to be loyal is not a fate but a choice tested in adversity.

It would, of course, be wrong to suggest the issue is Turnbull's alone. On the contrary, one could, with a slight degree of exaggeration, write the history of Australian politics over the past decade as a long succession of acts of perfidy, each provoking another.

Time and again, the term "hubris" has been bandied about by way of explanation; but the Greeks also gave us the word "hamartia", which is helpful both in its eventual meaning of "tragic flaw" and in its root from *hamartano* — to fall short, to lack the qualities the times demand.

Yes, each of the leaders who has gone through the prime ministerial revolving door has had strengths; but none fully measured up to what the situation required. And when that became apparent, Ajax too often prevailed over Achilles, entrenching the - difficulties.

Labor paid the price for that in 2013. Now it's the Liberals' turn. But if the turmoil in the Liberals is so far-reaching, it is because the leadership conflicts arise from much deeper contradictions.

The reality is that the social coalition on which the party rests is in disarray. That coalition has always been extremely heterogeneous, going from contractors and small business owners to well-off professionals, picking up groups such as self-funded retirees along the way.

Holding it together has never been easy. But even the most able leaders would not have succeeded without something that united its components. Three elements provided that glue.

The first, and most significant, was the abiding fear of Labor's inability to manage the economy.

The second was a moderate degree of conservatism, historically typical of the Australian middle class, which expressed itself in a distrust of Labor's closeness to the unions and of its agenda of intrusive government.

Last was the conviction that Liberal governments would look after each part of that coalition's interests and respect its core values, rewarding thrift, protecting independent schooling, preserving private health and ensuring taxes remained moderate.

Each of those elements has weakened, if not come undone.

Perhaps most importantly, economic factors have become far less salient. The young have never experienced high inflation and large-scale unemployment, while for the older generation they are distant memories. As those memories fade, the long-term rise in house prices has boosted private wealth, creating a widespread sense of wellbeing.

And with growth continuing year after year, economic outcomes no longer seem to depend on governments, reducing the credit they get for good times and breeding complacency about the political outlook.

At the same time, social values have changed, as have the priorities attributed to them. Rising wealth would, in any event, have increased the weight placed on goods such as the environment and on the desire to enjoy the warm inner glow that comes from "doing the right thing". In large swaths of the more affluent areas, education and secularisation have accentuated that trend, promoting socially "progressive" attitudes that jar with those of other parts of the Liberal base.

Compounding the problems that causes, while less educated voters are often comfortable with some inconsistency in their value systems, better educated voters tend to hold their beliefs as a coherent package that is shared by their peers and which defines their personal and group identity. Any deviations from that package are therefore hard to tolerate.

Finally, while the government has real achievements to its credit, the changes to superannuation and the conflict over Catholic school funding have shattered the confidence crucial constituencies have in the party, creating an enduring rift.

The combined effect of those changes has been devastating. With economic issues

losing their sway, the party no longer has a strong message that cuts through and is capable of offsetting the weaknesses it has allowed to develop in healthcare and education policy. With social attitudes diverging, and becoming generally more important for “progressives” and “traditionalists” alike, the party no longer has an ideological centre of gravity. And with supporters such as the self-funded retirees and Catholic parents feeling betrayed, the party no longer has the reserves of goodwill needed to tide it through adversity.

Little wonder the centrifugal pressures have proved so powerful. And little wonder that totemic issues such as climate change have acquired such prominence, acting as a poor replacement for serious thought about the party's nature, prospects and direction. As the fabric that once held the party together dissolves, personality conflicts have become increasingly intense.

When it emerged in ancient Greek, the word “crisis” referred to the crucial moment in the course of an illness that decides between life and death. The word itself was invested with dread, but implicit in it was the possibility of redemption.

Whether the Liberals can grasp that new beginning depends only on themselves — and on whether their past leaders choose to be remembered as Achilles or to die in the pathos of Ajax.