

# Ambition without judgment: in Porter and Hunt, a tale of two failures

*Liberal Party scions Christian Porter and Greg Hunt held dreams of the prime ministership. Both failed to achieve it. Both will be remembered for misjudgments -- though on very different matters.*

Bernard Keane - *Crikey* – 02 December 2021

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*“Perhaps the only certainty now is that there appears to be no limit to what some will say or allege or do to gain an advantage over a perceived enemy.”*

*Christian Porter, resignation statement, December 1, 2021*

Indeed. There was certainly no limit to Christian Porter’s willingness to inflict damage on Witness K and Bernard Collaery, driving an honourable, patriotic man who had served his nation in dangerous circumstances for decades to plead guilty to a vexatious charge of conspiracy, and stretching Collaery’s trial out to absurd lengths. Along the way, Porter abandoned the requirement for the attorney-general to be a model litigant, instead engaging in so much delay that three different magistrates criticised his legal representatives.

The goal was to punish K and Collaery for having the temerity to expose the crimes of the Howard government, to send a signal to anyone else who might be tempted to expose government wrongdoing about what would await them — a secret prosecution using “evidence” no one other than the presiding magistrate is allowed to see.

This is all well-known to *Crikey* readers, but bears repeating given Porter’s self-pitying exit from politics.

It’s also worth noting that it is not his enemies that accounted for the end of his political career and his ambition to be prime minister, but Porter himself. At every step since earlier this year, Porter has displayed colossal misjudgement in his response to strongly denied allegations about his sexual assault of a young women 30 years ago.

When Porter first publicly confirmed that he was the subject of those allegations, it would have been trivially easy for Porter and the prime minister to respond in a way that would have, almost certainly, ensured Porter would now still be attorney-general and assured of a long political career: Porter to stand aside while an independent inquiry was conducted by a judicial figure. Such an inquiry would have struggled to find any basis to reach concrete conclusions about the events at the University of Sydney’s women’s college that night, and Porter would have returned to his job, with the government able to justifiably say it had done its best to investigate the matter.

Instead, Porter made the first of many misjudgments: he remained in his position and allowed Morrison to simply accept his own assurances of no wrongdoing. Other misjudgments followed: suing the ABC, when it hadn’t identified him in its reporting; picking a lawyer who has a conflict of interest in the case; declaring victory over the ABC when the parties agreed

to settle and the story remained up. And then his worst misjudgement of all — thinking it was in any way appropriate to take money from anonymous donors to fund his legal bills.

Porter may have had the ambition to become prime minister. And certainly Scott Morrison and Tony Abbott have set the bar fairly low for the competence required for the job. But it was Porter's utter lack of judgment that made sure he leaves politics known for many other things than taking the top job.

Like Porter, Greg Hunt is from a privileged Liberal family. He, too, carried the leadership baton in his knapsack — though for much longer, given he entered Parliament when Peter Reith left politics in 2001. Hunt was never, as it were, in the hunt for the top role, being too junior for the aftermath of the Howard government and damaged goods by the time Malcolm Turnbull was dumped a second time.

Hunt had readily adapted to Turnbull's first axeing, working with Tony Abbott to craft the ridiculous fig leaf for Abbott's climate denialism, the notorious "direct action" plan, which relied on handing money to polluters to undertake efficiency projects they would do anyway, and paying farmers to pretend to sequester carbon in soil. The plan was repeatedly stripped of funding as the Coalition neared government in 2013 and afterwards; Labor quipped that Hunt getting rolled in cabinet was the only renewable energy source the Coalition was interested in.

After his disastrous attempt to join Peter Dutton on a leadership ticket in 2018, Hunt was left in Health, a politically crucial but second-tier portfolio, which became the centre of policy action as the pandemic set in. Hunt undoubtedly has worked to the point of exhaustion for most of the last two years, but must still carry responsibility for the federal government's two biggest pandemic failings: its failure to protect the lives of aged care residents, especially in Victoria, and its bungling both of the sourcing and distribution of vaccines, which opened the east coast up to a devastating Delta variant outbreak earlier this year. Those misjudgements, which reflect as much on senior Health bureaucrats as on Hunt himself, will loom large in the Australian history of the pandemic.

On the positive side, in the wake of the aged care royal commission, Hunt secured significant additional funding for aged care in a government response that, despite the critics, was a good start to addressing the structural, long-term problems in that sector, though it needs to be just the beginning of a years-long reform process to deliver improved quality of care for senior Australians.

If that actually happens, Hunt can at least count his time in politics as having delivered something positive. Quite a contrast with Porter.