

Bill Shorten's flaws come to the fore

Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, June 22, 2015

THREE months ago, it seemed Bill Shorten could not lose. Today, it seems the Labor leader cannot win. So no wonder there's talk in the Abbott Government of an early election, perhaps in November, after one of the most astonishing turnarounds in modern politics.

It is a turnaround that shows both the inner strength of Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the inner vacuum of Shorten. Memo: character counts.

In February, the Government seemed dead, with Newspoll putting it behind Labor 43 per cent to 57. Labor led by a devastating margin rarely seen in federal politics, as Abbott battled to survive a spill motion from backbenchers fed up with his tin ear, rude staff, bad polls, broken promises and go-it-alone ways. Even three weeks later, the ABC and Channel 7 news bulletins claimed as fact that rival Malcolm Turnbull had the numbers to replace Abbott the following week.

The next Newspoll, in March, showed the Government still lying in a grave, waiting only for the dirt. Labor was ahead, 45 to 55.

Then, as now, large parts of the media — particularly the ABC — seemed to want Abbott gone and were ready to report anything that might help.

Yet today? True, most polls still have the Government trailing Labor by about 48 to 52, but check the smiles on the government MPs and the frowns on Labor. Everyone in politics knows which way this is heading, barring accidents.

Here's why.

First, Shorten, already hampered by a curious inability to seem sincere, just didn't do the work. When Abbott was down, Shorten had the authority and margin for error to finally change the three policies that had killed Labor at the election.

He could have dumped Labor's promise to bring back a new carbon tax, its ban on turning back the boats and its commitment to vast and unfunded spending. Instead, he did nothing, lazily betting the public hated Abbott so much it would never vote for a government he led.

It seemed the height of wisdom among Labor MPs to quote Napoleon: "Never interrupt the enemy when he is making a mistake." But Napoleon was finally smashed at Waterloo, 200 years ago last Thursday.

And Abbott did stop making mistakes, very abruptly. More self-reflective than most, he took on the criticism and changed. He consulted more, ditched much of the foreign travel, stuck to bread-and-butter issues, junked loser policies on Medicare copayments and rolled-gold parental leave, talked more hope than doom, changed staff and splashed out Howard-style love with more childcare and tax breaks for small business.

A reshuffle had already put great salesmen in key positions — notably Scott Morrison in social services and Josh Frydenberg as assistant treasurer.

But while Abbott changed, Shorten went out of his way not to — even smacking down immigration spokesman Richard Marles when he dared suggest Labor was "open-minded" about supporting boat turnbacks since they had indeed "had an impact". Worse, far from promising to end Labor's big-spending ways, Shorten, in his Budget in reply speech in May, promised vast new spending — at least \$8 billion a year — to be offset by just \$2 billion a year in more tax hikes. And no cuts.

Wow. How to remind voters you can't be trusted with the till.

Just to rub it in, Shorten last week vowed to block the biggest saving in the Budget — the Government's plan to take the pension from millionaires — only to find even the Greens had decided to help pass it in the Senate.
Labor more economically reckless than the Greens? How could Shorten have done it?



Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and his deputy Tanya Plibersek.

Good question. Lack of smarts? Lack of courage? No faith in his ability to persuade colleagues and voters the money was gone and Labor had to change? Or did Shorten simply have no inner convictions to guide him, other than the conviction that Bill must be PM?

Who knows, but the public will suspect the worst of the man who famously said of then prime minister Julia Gillard: "I haven't seen what she said, but let me say I support what it is that she's said."

They'll also know what they saw on the ABC's top-rating *The Killing Season* this past fortnight — a man who first helped to knife then prime minister Kevin Rudd and then helped to destroy Gillard.

Untrustworthy.

In his defence, Shorten has had one excuse for being too scared to change. The Left is now taking control of Labor, and Shorten is of the Right.

As unions have surrendered some control over Labor, the rank and file have asserted themselves — and party members are usually more radical than their MPs. Indeed, 60 per cent of party members voted for the Left's Anthony Albanese in the leadership ballot Shorten only just won, with the backing of most MPs.

It is probably no coincidence, then, that Shorten has since sided with the Left on boats, the carbon tax, big spending and, last week, opposing the pension changes. See, for him the Left isn't just a vague idea. It has a very human form in his hungry deputy Tanya Plibersek. But it is not just Shorten who fears Plibersek. So do some in the Government — the ones who don't actually think Plibersek is so radical that she'll make Labor unelectable.

The worriers think Plibersek, as a smart and attractive woman of the Left, will instead be fully backed by the ABC and could charm women voters particularly.

For those MPs, then, it is better to have an early election while Shorten is wounded, and before Plibersek figures a way through Labor's ludicrous new leadership rules to take over.

How long will it take her to work out how to depose Shorten when, thanks to Rudd's "reforms", that would take a signed petition of 60 per cent of MPs just to call a leadership ballot that involves party members, too?

But if an early election was idle speculation last month, it's active speculation after last week, which was the most disastrous of Shorten's career. There were not just the mistakes — Shorten being outflanked by the Greens and attacking government bribes for people smugglers before being told Labor had almost certainly done the same.

There were also the well-documented allegations that Shorten as a union boss traded workplace conditions with employers in exchange for donations to his union, including payments for union memberships that boosted his power within Labor. Shorten and his allies protest that his deals were good for workers, but how do they explain the donations, some falsely invoiced as fees for "training"?

The royal commission into union corruption has agreed to let Shorten give evidence next month, earlier than it wanted, to let him try to clear the air. But it will almost certainly want him back later, as it digs deeper, keeping the story going into, well, say, November? Which, of course, might be just when the Government calls an election to seal the deal on its astonishing comeback.