

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's gay marriage victory

Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, August 12, 2015

TONY Abbott's victory in the same-sex marriage debate on Tuesday is a warning to his critics. He's not dead yet. Far from it.

Forget the bad polls.

This chronically underestimated Prime Minister has just nailed in place another critical part of his election strategy — one he's convinced will work.

In doing so, Abbott also showed he's much more in touch with his MPs than are his biggest rivals. There will be no challenge any time soon.

Abbott on Tuesday let more than 90 Coalition MPs speak during a marathon debate.

Two thirds backed him in resisting calls by Labor and the media class to break an election promise and let his MPs have a conscience vote on same-sex marriage.

Rival Malcolm Turnbull, though, was in the minority, demanding a free vote that would have ripped apart the party. But Abbott didn't "kill" gay marriage, as the hysterically angry Age newspaper screeched in a front-page headline.

In fact, he gave same-sex marriage campaigners their greatest chance of victory by offering them a plebiscite or referendum after the next election to let the public, not politicians, decide.

They should thank Abbott.

A conscience vote in Parliament would likely have failed. But Abbott's plebiscite should back same-sex marriage, if activists are right in claiming overwhelming public support.

That makes the difference between Labor and the Liberals on same-sex marriage just an argument over process: should this be decided by politicians or the public?

This means Abbott has cleared the way for an election debate more on Labor's crippling weaknesses and not its Twitter-bait issues of identity politics and global warming.

That is even more certain after Abbott this week also agreed to politically credible targets for cutting emissions — at least 26 per cent of 2005 levels by 2030 — at an eventual cost to the economy of between \$3 billion and \$4 billion a year.

You think that's too high a price? Well, look at Labor's alternative: a wild target of 50 per cent renewable energy by 2050 so hideously expensive that Labor does not even dare speculate on the cost. Abbott cannot wait to debate Opposition leader Bill Shorten on that madness.

True, even some conservatives will say I'm in denial of grim reality — Abbott's leadership is in strife.

And, yes, Abbott is already on his last chance after surviving a leadership spill in February called by colleagues sick of his tin ear, remoteness and blunderous political judgment.

Abbott did learn and change, getting the Liberals almost even with Labor in the polls, but then came more distractions over same-sex marriage, followed by the scandal over Speaker Bronwyn Bishop's outrageous expenses.

The Government's poll figures slumped again to around 47 to 53 behind Labor, and Abbott is again under attack over his judgment — not least in defending Bishop for too long. Once again, old problems are talked about. Treasurer Joe Hockey keeps drifting out of debates the Government badly needs to win, and Turnbull, the Communications Minister, offers the media free criticism of Abbott's positions, on Wednesday disowning Abbott's proposed plebiscite.

More ominously for Abbott, old media allies have gone bolshie. The Australian, one of the few newspapers not of the Left, is waging a campaign against his chief of staff, Peta Credlin, and now seems to be cooling on Abbott himself. On 2GB, influential host Alan Jones is attacking the Government over coal mining.

Yet Abbott and his strategists remain confident. They claim Labor's high vote comes largely in its safe seats and not in the critical marginals where Abbott is campaigning hard.

They say the Government is developing a strong story on jobs, free trade agreements, the navy frigates contracts for Adelaide, a development strategy for the north and more to come. It also has a story on Budget management — tighter spending with none of the spending disasters Labor committed in office.

And they have rich lines of attack on Labor — its plan for a kind of carbon tax, its weakness on boats and its promises of billions of dollars of more spending when we're still drowning in its last debt.

Moreover, Shorten is dogged by his admission this year of having lied to the media, and, worse, by his past union scandals, with more evidence still to come in the Royal Commission into union corruption.

But against the Liberals's spin are two deadly facts — an unemployment rate of 6.3 per cent and a Budget still so broken that we're spending \$96 million a day more than we earn. Yet those claiming it's as good as finished should ask: how many times already have they written off Tony Abbott?

Same-sex marriage: Tony Abbott mishandles issue

Niki Savva, The Australian, August 13, 2015

Summing up the mood of MPs in the Abbott government is easy. It's a mixture of anger and despair. Predicting where it will lead is a bit harder.

Here is what one senior cabinet minister thinks should happen. "If the polling doesn't turn around then Tony has to take it upon himself to ask himself the serious question: is it viable? "It's a brutally hard thing to do, but it might have to happen. You can't lead everybody off a cliff. You have to make that call. That's just the reality of politics."

As for the stigma, the sense of failure the Prime Minister would forever carry from such an ignominious withdrawal, this senior member of the government, previously one of Tony Abbott's staunchest advocates, couldn't even offer tough love. "If you lose the election there can be no bigger failure than that," he told me on Tuesday.

All backbenchers have been slimed by the length and breadth of the entitlements saga, now almost half the Liberal Party has been locked into supporting something they believe should have been left to their conscience. Backbenchers say they did their bit in February, so it's now up to the frontbenchers to take it up to the Prime Minister. Ministers, depending on whether they stand to win or lose from any upheaval, are loathe to act or prone, as above, to wishful thinking — or, worse, resigned to defeat mainly because, they reckon, the Prime Minister and those around him have convinced themselves it's all going swimmingly.

Given no prime minister since Robert Menzies has voluntarily relinquished the position (unless you count John Gorton voting against himself in the contest with Billy McMahon), given Abbott's own instincts and those surrounding him are to fight, fight, fight, then fight some more, the wishful thinkers are bound to be disappointed.

Sometimes Abbott has trouble recognising what is in his own interests, so trusting he would do what some think would be in the government's and step aside is whimsical, to say the least.

Take the election of Tony Smith as Speaker. Although he was denied a captain's pick, Abbott made it known to colleagues he did not want Smith to get the job.

The ultimate beneficiary of the restoration of order in the house would be Abbott. Of all the candidates, the person best equipped to achieve that, as shown by his performance so far, was Smith. Yet Abbott and his office persist with petty vendettas, for whatever historical or hysterical reasons. Smith's thumping 51 to 22 victory was largely a testament to his own skills — he has not lost a ballot since his student days — but it also showed that in a fair contest Abbott's ability to impose his will on the Liberal Party has been compromised.

His position remains fragile. He is not where he was in February, more where he was last December. Abbott's immediate survival relies on the support of his conservative base. He has done everything possible to preserve it, nowhere more obviously than in his handling of the marriage equality issue. He has scored a temporary victory without a clear resolution.

As one Liberal MP put it: "He has bought short-term relief at the price of long-term grief. Our policy is not that marriage is between man and a woman, our policy is to have a plebiscite and a free vote after the election."

Another tied it to the bigger picture: "In February the issue was about the Prime Minister's style of leadership and how the public perceived it. After yesterday the issue around his leadership is how he treats the Liberal Party."

In that context, colleagues saw Christopher Pyne's interventions as significant. In the past there has not been a sliver of difference between the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister, including supporting Bronwyn Bishop beyond what was prudent. Yet on Tuesday in the Liberal Party meeting, so offended was Pyne by what he saw as a traducing of party traditions that he accused his leader of branch stacking by calling in the Nationals as reinforcements. The Nationals had already discussed same-sex marriage in the privacy of their partyroom, but the Liberals were denied that right.

In the second joint party meeting, when the Nationals were present, Pyne said he did not believe they should be there, said it was a matter that should have been discussed by Liberals alone, while declaring it was not Liberal tradition for the majority to bind the minority. He also let his colleagues know he was disappointed the issue had not been discussed in advance by the leadership group or cabinet as it should have been.

Ultimately 46 Liberals voted against a free vote, with 33 in favour. The irony is the vote probably would have been the same if Abbott had allowed Liberals to discuss it on their own. There would not then have been such a bitter aftertaste.

The other irony, as Malcolm Turnbull pointed out, was the decision for a plebiscite or referendum — supported by Julie Bishop, Joe Hockey and Scott Morrison — prolongs the debate from now to the election (given there will now probably be a private member's bill up for debate in the Senate), through it and beyond, with serious opportunities for distractions and internal divisions. Conservatives want moderate frontbenchers such as Turnbull to resign if they can't toe the line. Abbott would have to sack them.

Meanwhile, moderates see a plebiscite/referendum as a ruse to set the issue up for defeat. They do not trust Abbott to frame the question fairly.

When he told his partyroom its base had to be respected otherwise “people would be forced to vote for fringe parties like Family First”, some of them could not help but conclude his way risked forever changing the character of the Liberal Party and turning it into one of those fringe groups.

They are taking time to digest the ramifications. They want to gauge feedback from their electorates. They appreciate it is a generational issue as much as a geographic one.

The view from the inner suburbs differs from the outer. What they also know is that important as it is, this debate has meant almost another week, after many, many such weeks, has passed without serious discussion of the economy, or tax or jobs or growth.

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