

Tony Abbott's leadership faces new dangers as Fairfax-Ipsos poll predicts Coalition wipeout

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The latest Fairfax-Ipsos poll reveals a massive swing of more than seven per cent against the government since the last election.

Malcolm Turnbull is cementing his lead over Tony Abbott as the most popular choice as Liberal leader and prime minister across all major voter groups, according to new polling which also shows the Coalition is facing a 36-seat electoral wipeout.

Despite Mr Abbott telling party faithful on Saturday that the government had "had two great years in government", his party would have been swept from office on the back of a devastating 7.5 per cent swing had an election been held on the weekend, the latest Fairfax-Ipsos poll reveals.

The bad news comes as the government continues to languish on the wrong side of popular opinion on issues such as marriage equality, for which public support remains high at 69 per cent, and global warming, where nearly six in every 10 voters think the policy response to date has been "too little".

Bitter internal divisions over how to proceed on the marriage equality front continue to dog the government, with senior ministers bickering and openly advocating positions at odds with the Prime Minister who now appears to favour a referendum some time next term if re-elected. A cabinet meeting in Canberra on Monday may settle the way forward, but the strength of voter sentiment and the apparent permanence of the government's poll deficit to Labor suggests that merely extending the hope of reform at a later date will be unconvincing.

A swing of 7.5 per cent would account for as many as 36 Liberal/Nationals seats falling - around 15 more than the 21 needed by Labor to form a majority government.

The poll follows a horror month for the Coalition, marked by self-inflicted crises embroiling Bronwyn Bishop and other MPs, cynical manoeuvring over same-sex marriage, and allegations of bias within its trade unions royal commission.

On a two-party-preferred basis, support for the government remains in the basement at 8 percentage points behind Labor on 46/54.

As Coalition MPs again discuss the limited options for engineering a late recovery in time for the next election due in a year, including a switch to either Malcolm Turnbull or another, such as Julie Bishop or Scott Morrison, the government's primary support has dipped to 38 per cent - just two points above Labor's 36 per cent. It secured 46 per cent of the primary vote at the last election.

Support for the Greens remains steady at a high 16 per cent, confirming a steady rise in the socially progressive environmental party's support under the leadership of the urbane former medico, Richard Di Natale.

The poll of 1402 respondents was taken from August 13 to 15.

According to the stated second preferences of respondents, rather than the allocation of second preferences as they flowed in September 2013, the situation for Coalition MPs is even worse. On this measure, the government has cornered just 44 per cent support to Labor's 56 - a 12 point gap - representing a 9.5 per cent swing that would wipe out as many as 44 seats.

Neither leader is very popular. Asked to rate their performances, Mr Abbott lost one point with a disapproval rating of 59 per cent and an approval rating of 35 for a net rating of minus 24 per cent. Mr Shorten is also in the red with more voters disapproving than approving but his is less severe with 39 per cent in favour - up 4 percentage points - and 49 per cent disapproving for a net rating of minus 10.

Among all voters, Mr Turnbull, known for his mainstream social views, leads as preferred Liberal leader and prime minister on 41 per cent to Ms Bishop on 23 per cent and Mr Abbott on just 15 per cent.

However, Mr Abbott still holds a clear edge over Mr Turnbull when that question is asked of Coalition voters exclusively. Among this cohort, Mr Abbott enjoys the support of 33 per cent to Mr Turnbull on 25 and Ms Bishop on 23. Despite his position as Treasurer, just 6 per cent of Liberal/Nationals voters rate Mr Hockey as an alternative leader.

The ongoing stoush over same-sex marriage is becoming a lightning rod for grievances in the electorate and within the government itself as senior ministers break ranks to criticise the Prime Minister's approach.

Attorney General George Brandis has traded blows with Mr Morrison using public appearances to slap down a proposal from the right-wing Social Services Minister to put same sex marriage to a full constitutional referendum. On Sunday, the nation's first law officer showed no signs of backing down and recommended the government move swiftly to outline its timetable. "I'm not sure that it will happen at the cabinet meeting scheduled for tomorrow, but I do agree and expect that this is a decision that the government should make very soon," he told Sky News.

Mr Abbott said the decision to put the matter to the people rather than the Parliament had now been made, but arguments remain over the merits of a plebiscite versus a referendum. In any event, pro-reform advocates view this as nothing more than a tactic to first delay and then defeat the push for equality. And they note it was the Prime Minister himself who earlier this year stated there was no need for any constitutional change on marriage law as it was already clearly established to be the province of the national Parliament.