

It's hard to discern any clear direction from the Prime Minister's leadership.

[Jennifer Hewett, AFR 15 March 2016](#)

A reader has sent a disappointed email keen to know if Malcolm Turnbull is really as flustered as he seems or just staging a series of tactical retreats. It's the same question most of Turnbull's anxious backbenchers are asking, along with the rest of the country.

Even on the most benign interpretation – that the confused and confusing messages out of Canberra are more tactical retreats necessary to bolster an overall strategy – it's still hard to discern any clear direction.

The hopes that accompanied Turnbull's ascension to the prime ministership six months ago are now looking decidedly tattered. John Howard may be right that the expectations shouldn't be too high after such a short period in office and that the government should be given time to deliver. But time is always the loser in any leadership spill.

Turnbull should have shown a much firmer sense of policy purpose, given the inevitable hyper speed tempo of an election year. He seems rather to be at risk of wasting away the immense community good will and desire for him to succeed.

Liberal backbenchers will be reassured by the latest Fairfax Ipsos polls showing voters still much prefer the idea of a Coalition government after previous Newspolls showed a 50-50 split of support for Labor and the Coalition on a two party preferred basis.

But this is supposed to be a government driven by superior policy and economic management rather than a constant nervous scramble in reaction to the latest polls. Instead, Turnbull is struggling to stay above the "rule in, rule out" straitjacket that came to define so much of the life of his predecessor.

That's also why this week is such a big deal in Canberra. Assuming the Greens stick to their deal of mutual convenience, the government should be able to pass a Senate voting reform package to rid itself of most pesky cross benchers come the election, whenever that may be.

Despite the erratic signals from the government, it is increasingly likely July 2 will be the date rather than the September or October timetable Turnbull originally preferred. A budget a week ahead of schedule on May 3 will also allow it to try again to pass – and presumably fail to do so – the bill to reestablish the Australian Building and Construction Commission.

Double dissolution trigger

That not only sets up a rational trigger for a double dissolution election. It will also make it easier to argue a campaign based on the need to clean up the shocking union corruption and standover tactics that cripple efficiency and add to costs in the construction industry. Add to that the prospect of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union formally linking up with that other bastion of union thuggery and disruption, the Maritime Union of Australia.

This combination makes for a persuasive scare campaign and the need to restore the rule of law for the economic good of the country. But such traditional industrial relations territory hardly equates to the sunny uplands of economic opportunity for Australia that Turnbull has been so eloquent and passionate in describing.

Turnbull is always much better at that than he is at fighting in the muddy trenches of combative Australian unionism with the CFMEU even if both roles are necessary for a Coalition Government. But a very long campaign means that it's even more important to have the more forward-looking policies sorted and saleable well ahead of time.

Instead policy prescriptions for the path to a brighter future are still being worked on in Canberra – in bits and pieces. The symbolism and optimism embraced in last year's innovation statement are no longer enough to stave off the insistence, including from an increasingly unhappy business community, on greater substance and consistency.

That includes producing a coherent and long-term package of reforms that supposedly all buttress one another and work in the same direction. Naturally this policy elixir is much easier to demand than deliver – especially when there's no money in the budget and no real appetite to find any from spending cuts.

Modest income tax cuts

The notion of an extremely modest personal income tax cut – possibly in exchange for more sizeable cuts to tax concessions for super – hardly equates to visionary reform, for example. It's more likely to produce the same disappointed reaction about a lack of substance and an excess of short-termism. Is that all there is?

Bill Shorten is trying to focus on this unexpected vulnerability in the Turnbull Government by at least putting out a series of policies. Labor is trying to sell as an economic downpayment on all the deficit spending it has yet to figure out how to cut. It is less the details of these policies that matter at the moment and more the image of a party willing to make choices – even bad ones. The government, of course, is determined to pin down the details and the risks of the individual policies – like Labor's proposed changes to negative gearing.

Treasurer Scott Morrison was at it again Monday with 28 questions on Labor's policy on restricting negative gearing to new housing only and halving the 50 per cent discount on capital gains tax. This sort of attack will have an impact and re-enforce doubts about Labor's economic credentials. But it doesn't make his proper day job of formulating and selling the government's own economic policies any simpler.

The May budget will be the official start of campaign countdown. It certainly won't be as unpopular as 2014's effort. It can't sink without trace as 2015's did.

The Government won't want anyone to be able to point out the real risk –that the Prime Minister Emperor has no policy clothes.