

Andrew Bolt on latest Newspann: Malcolm Turnbull just can't sell

ANDREW BOLT, Herald Sun, September 28, 2016 9:00pm
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LIBERAL MPs are in denial. The latest poll shows they have a Prime Minister who'll trash almost any cause they claim to believe in.

That's not just because Malcolm Turnbull isn't really a Liberal.

It is also because he just can't sell. Whatever Turnbull is for, a lot of voters instinctively feel they should be against.

The latest Newspann confirms it, and not just because the Liberal vote has dropped to just 48 per cent to Labor's 52. There was also this finding: the public's support for Turnbull's people's vote to decide on same-sex marriage has nearly halved.

This is astonishing. Earlier this year Newspann showed 70 per cent of voters backed a plebiscite rather than a vote of politicians. Just three months ago an Ipsos poll found 69 per cent support. Now Newspann says support is just 39 per cent. Incredibly, half of voters have changed their mind and not just because Labor leader Bill Shorten has a golden tongue.

No, blame Turnbull for being so half-hearted in arguing for the plebiscite he promised at the election.

Part of that is personal. The plebiscite was thought up by his predecessor, Tony Abbott, to allow same-sex marriage to be legalised without splitting the Liberal Party. It would have worked but Turnbull stuffed it.

First, he white-anted Abbott over his plebiscite and then, after the Nationals demanded he stick with it in return for making him Prime Minister, he argued for it like he wished he didn't have to.



Former prime minister Tony Abbott. Picture: Mick Tsikas/AAP

He even refused to go nuclear and tell Labor it was either his public vote or nothing. There would be no politicians' vote while he was Prime Minister. Any fool could see Turnbull was leaving himself wiggle room and was not committed to his plebiscite. Turnbull would protest that he didn't set out to lose this argument, but that just confirms that whatever he sells, the public won't buy.

Remember when he was head of the Australian Republican Movement, arguing for the republic that polls suggested was wanted by most voters?

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his wife Lucy in the US. Picture: Jake Nowakowski
Yet Turnbull lost that referendum, in 1999, in every single state.

Remember how Turnbull's approval ratings soared to a giddy 64 per cent in Newspoll in the first months after he toppled Abbott to the media's cheers? Yet that, too, has halved — to 32 per cent — as voters looked closer. In fact, two thirds of voters, according to this week's Essential poll, have concluded Turnbull is arrogant. That explains the farcical footage this week of Turnbull and wife Lucy travelling ostentatiously by train in Sydney to the complete indifference of the passengers, heads over their smartphones.

The feeling is mutual. Before long, Turnbull was checking out his own phone — even though he'd invited the TV cameras to film how much of a man of the people he was once he'd left his Point Piper palace.

For Liberals, this farce just keeps getting worse. This Liberal Government, supposedly for small government, this week decided on yet another tax hike — a \$5 rise in the tax on passengers on flights out of the country, to pay for its backflip on taxing foreign backpackers. This Liberal Government, supposedly the party of free choice and encouragement of effort, this week also had its Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, announce some private schools were "overfunded".



Education Minister Simon Birmingham. Picture: David Mariuz/AAP

And this Liberal Government, supposedly the party of free speech, still refuses to reform the Racial Discrimination Act to stop people suing for speech they claim merely “offends” them, even though an Essential poll this month said 45 per cent of voters backed such a change, and just 35 didn’t.

Here’s some advice for Turnbull. He travels best on a conservative road, and at least then pleases his own side. He’s tried a bit of that lately — for instance, saying he’d take in refugees from (hint, hint) Catholic Costa Rica — but he must do it more.

Already he’s had a warning this week from Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi, whose Australian Conservatives movement could be turned into a rival conservative party at the flick of a switch.

Bernardi urged Turnbull to pick up some of the more acceptable parts of the agenda of the resurgent Pauline Hanson, particularly on “migration, culture ... jobs, manufacturing” — plus a ban on more refugees from Iraq and Syria.

Bernardi is right, and Turnbull must offer voters an alternative to the Labor-Green agenda, not just a watered-down version that satisfies nobody. But again, that familiar question: could Turnbull actually sell anything, even if his political life now depended on it?

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