

Malcolm Turnbull hears the voters' siren call, and it's a klaxon

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Malcolm Turnbull may have won over the parliament but he is losing the public.

The Prime Minister gained big victories on Friday when the Senate approved some of his company tax cuts and some of his changes to the way racial hatred complaints are handled.

The achievements are central to the Coalition's pledges on free enterprise and free speech. The Prime Minister invested heavily in both and was able to prove he and his team could get results in a difficult Senate.

Yet voters are not impressed. Turnbull and his government have gone backward on every indicator in today's Newspoll — primary vote, two-party vote, preferred prime minister and both measures of leadership net satisfaction. Although most of the falls are within the margin of error, the five key measures all ring the same alarm. Together, they sound like a klaxon.

Turnbull and his cabinet ministers give no sign of wanting to change direction in response to these warnings. Their strategy is to make steady progress on their stated agenda, just as they did with the company tax cuts.

This approach seemed to pay off when the last Newspoll, conducted in the days after the "Snowy 2.0" announcement, showed a recovery in the Coalition's primary vote and an increase in Turnbull's personal ratings.

Today's poll shows the Coalition falling back towards the grim results at the beginning of the year. The government's supporters might argue they are still ahead of where they stood in February. On a two-party-preferred basis, the Coalition trailed Labor by 45 to 55 on February 26 and now lags by 47 to 53.

The Turnbull government is no longer at record lows, but that is small comfort.

What is clear is that the Snowy gain has melted away. The big nation-building idea gave Turnbull a boost two weeks ago. He gets no bonus today for getting laws through the Senate in recent days. This makes sense.

While polls have shown some voters want to amend section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act and cut the company tax rate, the sentiment falls short of majority support. The message is that voters are in no mood to reward Turnbull for making progress on his old agenda. Why should they, if they think he is heading in the wrong direction?

For any other prime minister, the solution would be a bold new direction on a social or economic issue, but this is fraught with danger for Turnbull. He has to contend with a divided Coalition partyroom and a predecessor who can sow dissent with a single tweet. Whether the problem is deliberate undermining or self-indulgent argument, the result is the same: Turnbull never gets enough room to move.

The alarms are sounding for the entire Coalition, not just the Prime Minister. Turnbull cannot win from making incremental progress alone. He will have to do something far more dramatic.