

Gonski win shows Malcolm Turnbull not without hope of turning Coalition fortunes around

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IN 2013, Kevin Rudd seized back the prime ministership because Labor under Julia Gillard had been behind in Newspoll for so long that recovery looked impossible. What was not known at the time was that focus group research showed preconditions for an improvement in Gillard's polling were starting to appear.

She was getting "better quals", as the pollsters say, referring to qualitative research into what people think as opposed to raw numbers. While far from enamoured with her, the punters were noticing her persistence in the face of a hung Lower House and a difficult Senate. They were reluctantly acknowledging her achievement in getting legislation passed. "She's doing a lot," was a line coming through.

According to an experienced pollster: "The building blocks for change in the public polls were being put in place." But Rudd swooped before that happened.



Malcolm Turnbull's best hope of retaining power is to ignore polls. Picture: Kym Smith

The Gillard example should provide some hope for Malcolm Turnbull and his forces, particularly since Tony Abbott is no Rudd. Abbott lacks the popularity that was Rudd's greatest asset. And, as one of the Liberal Party's most seasoned backroom operators said yesterday: "Tony is as destructive as Kevin, but he's not as smart about it."

The government's failure to gain a Newspoll bounce from last month's Budget has, of course, worried Turnbull supporters and delighted his opponents. When the latest Newspoll on Monday showed Labor maintaining its big lead over the Coalition, Sydney radio shock

jock Alan Jones was so excited that he leapt out of his sickbed and went on air briefly to tell the Prime Minister: “For God’s sake, 53-47. I mean, go!”

Jones — like Melbourne’s Andrew Bolt — is an Abbott supporter, virulently anti-Turnbull.

But the group of Liberal MPs that shares their views is very small and looks to be getting smaller. Indications are that Abbott is more isolated than ever among his parliamentary colleagues. He got very little support in the party room when he expressed serious concerns about the so-called Gonski 2.0 schools funding package. Most Coalition MPs wish he would just go away.



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While Turnbull can’t get rid of Abbott, he is cleaning up Abbott’s mess. Getting the Gonski measures through parliament on Thursday night was a key part of that. It is obvious now that Turnbull faces a long, hard slog. He should forget about the next Newspoll — and the five, 10, even 15 after that — and concentrate on the next election in two years.

Too many politicians trying to please the polls don’t do what’s necessary for long-term success.

The Gonski package passed late on Thursday night, after Education Minister Simon Birmingham showed impressive cat-herding skills with the crossbenchers, was the latest in a series of legislative wins for the Coalition. The Turnbull Government is being seen to govern. It is getting runs on the board.

If it can keep this up consistently, without being diverted by internal divisions or Labor provocations, it might — like Gillard — start to get better “quals”.

And that, in turn, would produce eventual movement in Newspoll and perhaps establish the preconditions for a realistic tilt at electoral survival.

Some commentators argue that the schools funding package might lose more votes than it gains because of the hostile reaction of sections of the Catholic education community. But most Liberal MPs seem remarkably unfazed by the Catholic threats. That is because Birmingham has armed them with facts for use in defending the reforms. “We’re getting pro forma letters from Catholic parents complaining that funds for their schools are being cut,” one MP said yesterday. “We reply saying that’s wrong and provide information to prove it. There’s no hostile kickback.” “We’re talking maybe 15 or 20 letters a week — certainly not an avalanche.”

THERE are headwinds for Turnbull, of course, perhaps chief among them the economy and specifically the feeling among many voters that increasingly we have a rewardless economy. That was particularly evident in the recent UK election and was starting to be a factor in our election last year. It results from such factors as slow or non-existent wages growth, the impact of new technology on jobs and unaffordable housing.

Threats to penalty rates feed into it.

Traditionally, the Coalition has had a big edge over Labor on economic management, but if people feel the economy does not reward them, that advantage disappears. It is an issue the government needs to confront.

Turnbull’s main task, though, is to make government work and ensure that this does not go unnoticed. Results will be slow, but it is his best hope.

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