

Newspoll figures clearly say Malcolm Turnbull's time is up



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

John Stone, *The Australian*, 12:00AM July 5, 2017

A number of *The Australian's* contributors — Peter van Onselen and David Crowe being the most notable — regularly refer to Malcolm Turnbull's benchmark of Tony Abbott having lost 30 successive Newspolls. However, as I pointed out in a recent article in *The Spectator Australia*, if performance in Newspolls is to be a litmus test for remaining PM, there is no reason for the focus to be on that "30 Newspolls" metric.

With his current loss of 14 consecutive Newspolls, Turnbull's supporters argue that this still leaves him 16 shy of the trigger for a challenge. However, it actually places him only two more losses away, given the first attempted spill by Turnbull backers against Abbott's leadership took place in February 2015, when Abbott had lost only 16 straight Newspolls.

As it happens, Turnbull had earlier betrayed another Liberal leader with a challenge after just 16 successive Newspoll losses, when he backstabbed Brendan Nelson in 2008.

Be that as it may, closer examination of recent Newspoll history suggests that there are at least two alternative metrics available for measuring how a party is travelling than simply "number of successive poll losses" on a two-party preferred basis. These metrics would seem likely to provide better guides to the outcomes in "the only poll that counts", namely the next federal election.

Those alternative measures relate to: how long a party is substantially behind, on a sustained basis, in TPP terms, where “substantially” means four or more percentage points — roughly equivalent to a deficit of more than a half-million votes, nationally (we’ll call this metric one); and performance on primary votes rather than on a TPP basis, with the primary vote giving a more meaningful indication of how depressed is the level of a party’s core supporters — those who, critically, parties need to be able to energise to turn out and support them in a campaign (metric two).

On both these metrics, Turnbull’s performance in terms of bad polling while PM has already far exceeded the worst that Abbott recorded. On that basis, the debate is no longer about how long it should be before Turnbull is challenged, but about why he was not tossed aside by his party some time ago.

To be precise, on metric one, the Coalition under Turnbull has now been consistently behind in Newspoll by four or more percentage points (that is, 48 Coalition, 52 Labor, or worse) for 14 polls in a row. Under Abbott as PM the Coalition was never consecutively behind by this big a margin for more than eight polls.

Note also that the main period when Abbott was behind by that much for eight straight Newspolls was directly after the tough 2014-15 budget — when his government was at least fighting for difficult decisions designed to address our longer-term debt and deficit problem, rather than, as recently, showering voters with tens of billions in extra debt-fuelled spending to try to buy a Newspoll bounce. As for metric two, the Coalition’s primary vote has now been at a catastrophic 37 per cent or less for eight successive Newspolls (and below 40 per cent for 14 consecutive polls). Under Abbott as PM the Coalition’s primary vote was never so consistently at such low levels — hitting 37 per cent or less for just six straight polls immediately after that hardline 2014-15 budget before rising back to 40 per cent, and again just twice in a row in November 2014.

Otherwise, for almost the whole period of almost six years that Abbott was leader of the opposition or PM, the Coalition’s primary vote was more than 40 per cent — and for a fair part of that time, more than 45 per cent.

On what would seem to be these superior metrics, then, the writing has been on the wall for Turnbull for some time.

Having justified knifing his leader to become Prime Minister on what can now be seen as the false allegation (relatively speaking) of poor polling, Turnbull’s time is not merely halfway up, or nearly up, it already expired some time ago.

The sooner his parliamentary colleagues realise this, recover from their paralysis and take their fate back into their own hands, the better for all of us who fear the consequences of a future Labor-Greens government.

John Stone is a former secretary to the Treasury and senator for Queensland.