

Malcolm Turnbull's prime ministership saved by Liberals' shaky grip on power

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LUCKY Malcolm Turnbull. His government's grip on power is now so shaky it may be too dangerous to sack him. Sack the Prime Minister and the Liberals risk losing power within months.

But keep him and they'll have at least another year-and-a-half before they lose the election. That's now the best the demoralised Liberals can hope for.

Turnbull's leadership has been so disastrous — especially during this citizenship crisis — that the minor parties he'd hoped would prop him up have been deserting him, leaving his government hanging by a thread.

In the House of Representatives, where governments are formed, the Coalition has a majority of a single seat. But the High Court may soon rule that Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce must go, having been a New Zealand citizen when elected.

Yes, Joyce is favourite to win his seat back in a by-election, after last week renouncing his Kiwi citizenship, but as the polls swing hard against the government, nothing is certain.

If Joyce loses, the government would need one of the five crossbenchers to back it to stay in power. But Turnbull has lost the support of Bob Katter and the Xenophon Party's Rebekha Sharkie, and never had that of Andrew Wilkie or the Greens' Adam Bandt.

Only Leftist independent Cathy McGowan is sticking with him. But if the Liberals sack Turnbull, panicked by the latest polls, would she stick with his replacement? Maybe, if he were replaced by Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop.

But the Liberals must know Bishop is no leader. Her poor political judgment was exposed last week when she ludicrously warned she'd have trouble trusting any Labour-led New Zealand government because one Labour MP helped prove Joyce was a Kiwi. Her tanty made her a laughing stock.

Tony Abbott, the former prime minister and the only candidate with a strategy to beat Labor, is the most obvious replacement. But which crossbencher would back a government led by Abbott? Katter, maybe?

Worse, if a sacked Turnbull then quit parliament, the Liberals could lose his seat in a by-election, too. This means Abbott, or fellow conservative and likely candidate Peter Dutton, would need at least one crossbencher, and maybe two, to back them before any challenge.

Otherwise, the Liberals will keep Turnbull, for better or the worse that's sure to come.