

Divided they fall: Coalition's calamity counters PM's appeal

[David Crowe](#), The Australian, 12:00AM August 7, 2017

Voters have turned on the Coalition with a vengeance since the last election but are giving Malcolm Turnbull the benefit of the doubt.

No matter how grim the result for the government as a whole, the Prime Minister keeps his lead over Bill Shorten.

Turnbull has done this again in the latest Newspoll with his strongest performance as preferred prime minister since last year. This is a perfect moment for Liberal and Nationals MPs to look in the mirror and consider whether they are the bigger problem than their leader. While the Coalition lags behind Labor by 47 to 53 per cent, Turnbull has a lead over Shorten of 46 to 31 per cent.

If there is a huge weight dragging the Coalition down, it is not Turnbull.

Yes, the Prime Minister is yet to show he has a strategy to beat Labor after six consecutive Newspolls showing the same dire result in two-party terms. His political judgments can be flawed and he lacks the cunning that helped predecessors such as John Howard demolish their opponents.

But everything is relative in politics and Turnbull is relatively popular. Voters have come close to giving Shorten their preference but every time the gap narrows in one poll it widens in the next.

The message from this Newspoll is that the Coalition has an asset worth protecting. It's a message that conservative critics will not like but it is based on hard numbers rather than the old hatreds that pass for commentary these days.

Turnbull's net satisfaction — the difference between those satisfied and those dissatisfied with his performance — sank as low as negative 30 points in February when 59 per cent thought he was doing a poor job and only 29 per cent gave him their approval. His rating is now a negative 12 points, the best it has been since his dramatic fall from grace with the electorate early last year.

Shorten has also gained ground, from negative 28 in March to negative 15, but the improvement has been greater for Turnbull.

Today's poll is another calamity for the government, showing it would be wiped out by Labor at an election held now. It is now three months since the budget and the government has not been able to shift the 47:53 result in two-party terms. This is a modern record in Newspoll plateaus on this measure.

At every stage on that plateau, in every one of the 12 weeks, the government's biggest problem has been its internal division. MPs have chosen to fight each other rather than a common opponent.

Liberals may find a temporary solution on same-sex marriage today but the infighting is certain to continue. This is irrational to the point of political suicide. Robert Menzies allowed a conscience vote on marriage in 1961 but his successors cannot bring themselves to do the same.

The social conservatives within the party risk turning into reactionaries who would rather destroy the government than allow it to move with the times.

The dysfunction is being baked into the way the partyroom works. Unless they change, they're cooked.