

Coalition sits at the last chance saloon

Dennis Shanahan, The Australian, 12:00AM August 12, 2017

If the Coalition's primary vote support figures were pulses on a heartbeat monitor, the patient would be dead, or at least there would be shouts of "clear" as the electric shock of a defibrillator was applied to restore life.

There is a widespread recognition, acceptance even, within the Liberal Party that the situation is dire and time is running out to start the vital process of recapturing the lost Liberal votes that are essential for a Coalition victory.

If there is no improvement in the Coalition's results in Newspoll surveys in the next few months, Malcolm Turnbull will be more than two-thirds of the way to his self-declared measure of failure — being behind on two-party preferred terms in 30 Newspoll surveys in a row — and heading into a likely election year.

The Prime Minister has to act before then and lift Coalition support or the widespread frustration with the government's messy performance, inability to target Labor effectively, to exploit fully the advantages of national security and make inroads on the cost of living could turn into even more damaging panic.

Senior Liberals recognise the Turnbull government must lift voter support as soon as possible and that Turnbull's ascendancy over Bill Shorten as preferred prime minister, assumptions of high preference flows from One Nation and claims the election is "two years away" are false hopes at best and delusion at worst.

In the febrile world that federal politics has become, these circumstances would be grounds for real consideration of the removal of a leader between September and the end of the year, as was the case with the past two prime ministers dumped by their own parties, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott.

Despite reckless speculation and breathless predictions that the Liberal Party deliberations on same-sex marriage this week could bring down Turnbull, the conditions for such action simply do not exist. Turnbull's saving grace is that there is no group of MPs plotting to replace him as leader with their own champion as there was in 2013 and 2015, despite disappointment at his leadership and frustration with his political performance.

There is also a sense in the cabinet that Turnbull has had to be saved from himself on several issues and is likelier to fall over than be pushed over.

But the latest Newspoll results in The Australian this week are dire for Turnbull, notwithstanding the fall in the Opposition Leader's standing as preferred prime minister, and ultimate action against him can't be ruled out.

Apart from being the 16th consecutive Newspoll survey in which the Coalition trailed Labor on two-party-preferred terms, and at a disastrous 47 per cent to 53 per cent, the survey cemented the Coalition's longest, lowest period of primary vote support in Newspoll history.

Since the beginning of this year, the Coalition's primary vote has been more than 36 per cent just once, 37 per cent in March, and below it three times. For eight months, the Coalition's primary vote has flatlined at 36 per cent, six percentage points shy of the minimum primary vote the Coalition has needed to hold or win back government.

This is a worse performance than John Howard's worst experience as prime minister in March 2001, 35 per cent, when he was told by his own Liberal Party president that he was seen as "mean and tricky" and was suffering the backlash of introducing the GST.

This was the Liberal Party's nadir in Newspoll and the Coalition's worst primary vote under Howard, but he recognised the danger and cut the cost of living by slashing fuel excise on petrol, and dragged the primary vote back up to 38 per cent within six weeks and had it at a winnable 43 per cent by June.

Before the arrival of the Norwegian ship Tampa in August with its rescued asylum-seekers and the boost to Coalition standing as a result of Howard's refusal for it land on Australian soil, Labor's lead had been lost.

Never under Abbott's leadership, even after the 2014 budget, did the Coalition experience such sustained low primary vote in Newspolls. Senior Liberals know something has to be done to lift the primary vote by further damaging Shorten's personal standing, holding Labor to account and addressing the stress households are feeling over high energy prices.

This week, after a long, fraught and messy journey over same-sex marriage, the Coalition arrived at a hard-fought resolution through the compromise of delivering the Abbott government's policy of a people's vote on the issue through a postal vote plebiscite after having the preferable option of a full plebiscite blocked by Labor and the Greens in the Senate.

The long lead-up to the culmination of a divisive and difficult issue for the Liberal Party and Turnbull had taken a toll on the Coalition's standing, as well as the Prime Minister's leadership.

Turnbull, who supports same-sex marriage and didn't want a plebiscite, was caught between conservative MPs, such as Abbott, and a conservative Liberal Party base that is against same-sex marriage and wants a plebiscite put to the Senate "again and again", and those MPs wanting an immediate free parliamentary vote for the Liberal Party to implement same-sex marriage.

The conservative leader in cabinet, Peter Dutton, working with Mathias Cormann, who was given the task of producing a viable legal mechanism in a few days, advocated a postal vote

to ensure there would be an opportunity for everyone to have their say while not endlessly fighting a losing battle in the Senate.

Essentially, Dutton wanted the issue resolved in such a way as to satisfy conservative Liberal Party members and end the Liberal divisions that Shorten was able to exploit daily and attack Turnbull's "complete lack of leadership".

Both the yes and no sides in the Liberal Party were increasingly frustrated and angry at Turnbull's lack of firm direction. The issue went from a position of no great priority to a special partyroom meeting to a postal ballot in the space of two weeks.

The conservatives were angry that Turnbull didn't just stick to the policy of a full plebiscite, and the so-called rainbow rebels felt so frustrated they decided to bring the issue to a head with damaging, publicly implied threats to cross the floor and side with Labor.

In the end, the compromise and humiliating defeat for the handful of MPs pushing for a free vote was met with general relief that a way through had been found that would resolve the issue: there will be a same-sex marriage vote in parliament by the end of the year or the issue will be closed off, as was the republic in 1999.

One cabinet minister tells *The Weekend Australian*: "There was a palpable sense of relief that the right way forward had been found and we could switch to issues such as rising energy prices."

Certainly, the broad agreement of cabinet ministers, Liberal and National as well as yes and no supporters, effectively to run dead on same-sex marriage for the next three months and to concentrate on the economy, national security and cost of living provides the opportunity for the government to draw back disaffected voters.

Even Turnbull, while being criticised by Shorten for being "too busy" to campaign for the yes vote, has indicated he will be concentrating on North Korea, energy policy, jobs and the economy rather than same-sex marriage.

Yesterday, Turnbull accused Shorten of inconsistency on same-sex marriage, having supported a plebiscite and free votes, and made it clear that invoking the ANZUS Treaty, discussing Islamic State threats to aeroplanes in Australia and economic management are his obligations as leader.

"My focus will be obviously No 1 to be Prime Minister ... you know, run the government, look after Australians," he says.

"Same-sex marriage is an important issue but there are a lot of other much more important issues for me to focus on, but I will certainly encourage Australians to vote yes."

There are still pitfalls ahead for the government and Turnbull on same-sex marriage — the High Court for starters — but for the first time in a year of meandering and divisions, there

is a path forward, no matter what the result of the plebiscite, and another chance, perhaps a last chance, for the Coalition to draw back disaffected supporters and get back to the winners' circle.