

# DIS-CON NOTES

John Stone

## NO MORE SHILLY-SHALLYING

When Parliament sits on Monday, it will (I assume) be greeted by another Newspill. The last one was so bad for the Coalition (and Malcolm Turnbull personally) that Monday's is expected to show some 'recovery bounce'. Let's see.

Meanwhile, consider this 14-month polling record:

- Beginning September 27, 2016, all 23 Newspolls showed Coalition trailing Labor by a substantial two-party-preferred (2PP) margin, where 'substantial' means four percentage points or more (i.e., Coalition 48, Labor 52, or worse).

- The 12 most recent polls (commencing May 15) all saw Coalition trailing Labor by six percentage points or more.

- And the last four have shown Coalition trailing Labor by eight percentage points or more.

The Coalition's primary vote performance is equally disastrous. The Coalition barely survived the last election with a 41.8 per cent primary vote.

Yet:

- For the last 23 polls, its primary vote never exceeded 40 per cent.

- For the 18 most recent polls, commencing February 6, 2017, it never exceeded 37 per cent, and for 16 of them, 36 per cent.

- On November 13, it was only 34 per cent.

These figures speak for themselves. For more than nine months now (at least) a dreadfully adverse electoral verdict has become 'baked in'. Voters are no longer listening to Turnbull, whose own tin ear for them, in turn, is notorious. Nothing the current Coalition leadership can do will change this. As others have said, voters' apparent resignation to this debacle can now only be changed by some kind of circuit breaker. A recent editorial in this esteemed journal even proposed calling an early general election. With great respect to that editorial's author (distinguished historian of the Labor party, Emeritus Professor Ross Fitzgerald), that counsel of despair would only result, given the current state of elec-

toral opinion, in a Bill Shorten-led Labor government with a huge majority – a prospect too terrible to contemplate. That said, the truth underlying the editorial – need for a circuit breaker – remains. So it's time for that – in the form of a Liberal leadership change – to be brought on.

On October 21 last (*Dis-Con Notes: Toughen up, Snowflakes*) I said: 'The only half-rational reason' for the inertia besetting the Liberal party room 'may be that, with a Queensland election now said to be imminent, the Queensland LNP are pressing their Canberra Liberal colleagues not to rock the boat until that is behind them'. But, 'once it is, there should be no more shilly-shallying' over the Liberal leadership. With Queenslanders having now voted, and disastrously so for the LNP, even that 'half-rational reason' for delay has evaporated.

In that previous *Dis-Con Note* I said: 'The qualities he [Tony Abbott] now offers of hard political lessons learned and his past proven capacity to capture (or in today's case, hold) seats, should make him the leading candidate'. But, 'my primary focus is not on restoring Abbott to the leadership, but on ensuring Labor is defeated in 2019. If... that means a new leader, from the party's right, who can also bring Abbott's talents back to the frontbench in an appropriately senior position, so be it'. Since that was written, two things have now led me to press Abbott's candidacy more strongly.

First, a remarkable *Weekend Australian* article by Chris Kenny ('Turnbull has lost his way but the Coalition has a fallback option'). Starting from my own imperative – that Australia simply can't afford a Shorten-led Labor government – Kenny said 'we approach the end of 2017 seemingly ungoverned', with a 'Prime Minister paralysed by indecision', his leadership having become so toxic he is now 'preoccupied with surviving until Christmas'.

Noting that 'some of the wisest heads in parliament and punditry point out... leadership switching is fatal', Kenny argued that, while that may be generally true, 'one leadership alternative will always remain for the Coalition: not another unexplained contortion but a

reversion' to 're-install someone elected in a landslide in 2013 and robbed of a chance at re-election'.

The second thing changing my mind on the Abbott candidacy has been the same-sex 'marriage' imbroglio. We No voters accept that the *Marriage Act* must now be amended. What many of us will not accept, however, is the devious approach to the survey process of the Turnbull/Brandis/Pyne coterie – or, still worse, their subsequent reneging on the legislative protections promised by Turnbull against the further attacks on our freedoms that the changed definition of marriage will now inevitably produce. Feelings on this latter point are running so high that, last weekend, three Liberal assistant ministers (Angus Taylor, Michael Sukkar and Senator Zed Seselja) strongly criticised their so-called 'moderate' colleagues over it.

If, at the next election, Turnbull still leads the Coalition, that deviousness will not go unpunished. In effect, our Dis-Con ranks have now been swollen by many of the 4,874,000 No voters. By contrast, these new Dis-Cons have in Abbott a man whose own commitment to their view of marriage is unquestionable. Unlike Turnbull, Abbott would hold them within the Liberal party fold.

The conclusion should be obvious. As CoreData chief Andrew Inwood said recently, 'The data is clear – Australians will vote with their social beliefs, rather than their political beliefs'. So, with that tide of No vote protesters rolling towards it, the Coalition now has only one chance: reversion to Abbott.

The Turnbull coterie will argue that, with the Bennelong by-election pending on December 16, this is no time for a Liberal leadership upheaval. On the contrary, with Labor's campaign focused on 'sending Turnbull a message', and in one of the few seats outside western Sydney where the No SSM vote prevailed, reversion to Abbott looks like the only chance of holding that seat.

For God's sake, bring it on!