

OPINION

## **Liberals must dump Turnbull — and the only leader who fits is Abbott**

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Let me get this straight: the New England by-election was a great win for Malcolm Turnbull personally, right? And the Queensland election disaster for the Liberal National Party had no implications federally, right? John Barilaro's call for Turnbull to resign this week was totally irresponsible, right? As for Monday's Newspoll, Turnbull has never paid any attention to opinion polls, right? And if you tick even one of those questions, let alone all four, I have a great Harbour Bridge to sell you.

The glaring contradiction between the first two of those assertions needs no further comment. As for Barilaro's views, all the Canberra press gallery yelps of outrage notwithstanding, nobody should have been surprised. In mid-October he had already told his party that, federally, it was "being dragged down by what's happening with the Liberal Party ... Federally, the Libs need to sort themselves out". So when the Queensland election results translated into a wholesale wipe-out of LNP incumbents, the only surprise was that it took Barilaro to call "time". If Barnaby Joyce were a leader, he should long ago have made the same point, privately at least, to Turnbull.

As for the polling figures, they speak for themselves, and have been doing so for months. Monday's Newspoll was merely the latest writing on Turnbull's prime ministerial wall. The usual Abbott-haters can go on desperately writing that Turnbull still has another half-dozen adverse Newspolls to go before he reaches their talismanic 30 successive ones; or, even more desperately, that he is still ahead of Bill Shorten in the "preferred prime minister" ratings — a metric to which no reputable analyst pays much attention.

Out there in voter-land, however, people long ago made up their minds. Politically speaking, Turnbull is a dead man walking — and in rushing to his support, John Howard should worry about his own reputation. It's not just that 24 successive Newspolls have shown the Coalition trailing Labor by at least 4 percentage points on a two-party-preferred (2PP) basis. The last 13 showed the gap widening to 6 percentage points or more; and in four of the last five, to 8 points.

The primary vote performance, which I argued here five months ago is basically more important than the 2PP metric, is catastrophic. After barely surviving the last election with a primary vote of 41.8 per cent, for the past 24 polls the Coalition has never exceeded 40 per cent, and for the last 17, it has not exceeded 36 per cent.

To make matters worse for the Coalition, a new threat has now emerged from the same-sex marriage survey. We 4,874,000 No voters accept, of course, that the Marriage Act must be amended. What many of us will not accept, however, is the disgraceful manner in which the Turnbull-Brandis-Pyne coterie oversaw the conduct of the survey, and the even more disgraceful manner in which Turnbull has since brazenly reneged on his clear promise that religious freedoms, including parental rights, would be protected.

On December 16 this new factor will see Labor winning the Bennelong by-election. Labor's theme urging voters to "Send Turnbull a message" was already biting hard, as the agonised appeal from the Liberals' NSW division (The Australian, 30/11/17) revealed. But in an electorate where half voted No, a Maronite Christian Australian Conservatives candidate will leach additional votes away from John Alexander, just as One Nation did to the LNP in Queensland.

Some things have now long been obvious. First, Turnbull must go. Second, the sooner the better. Third, his replacement must be from the party's right (ruling out Julie Bishop). Fourth, as Chris Kenny wrote last month in The Weekend Australian, while there are costs to any leadership change, "one leadership alternative will always remain for the Coalition": a reversion to "reinstall someone elected in a landslide in 2013 and robbed of a chance at re-election".

Kenny is right. If the Liberals want to hold Bennelong, they should not only replace Turnbull immediately, but also choose a leader whose own commitment to traditional marriage is unquestionable. Only one person fits: Tony Abbott.

John Stone is a former secretary to the Treasury and former National Party Senate leader.