

Coalition keeps losing ground despite runs on the board



Malcolm Turnbull with New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern in Sydney yesterday. Picture: Getty Images

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The Turnbull Coalition has surrendered the advantages of being in government and is now more likely to lose ground when parliament sits than not.

Incumbency carries definite electoral and political advantages that governments can exploit to set the political agenda, establish a broad election strategy, restrict opposition opportunities and control parliament.

It is essential for a government to use parliamentary sittings and set-pieces to establish authority, project its message to the people and to dominate the opposition.

At the very least the government of the day has to ensure the business of parliament is conducted in a sensible and orderly fashion. Ministers should also appear competent and more interested in issues affecting ordinary people than in their own careers and insider politics.

The last two parliamentary sitting periods have amply demonstrated the Coalition's inability to use the power of incumbency. The slightest Newspoll improvement for the government after the summer holiday break was swamped as soon as parliament resumed. What's more, the nascent success of a campaign to exploit Bill Shorten's leadership as Labor's weakness was set back.

The government faced the beginning of 2018 knowing there had been record job creation in 2017. Furthermore, the economy was growing, inflation was low, welfare dependency was falling, and Tony Abbott's brave boast of creating one million jobs would be reached "ahead of time". Two by-elections had been successfully won and housing prices in the hot spots of Sydney and Melbourne would slow.

Going into 2018, on the Labor side, the Opposition Leader's conflicted and contradictory positions on coalmining and the environment, concocted to appeal to miners and greens at the same time, were being exposed; the ALP campaign for the seat of Batman was in strife; union lawlessness was creating more problems and factional infighting intensified.

Yet, after the first three weeks of parliamentary sittings, the Coalition has gone backwards in Newspoll and Malcolm Turnbull's lead over Shorten as preferred prime minister has halved and is back to where it was for most of last year.

It's hardly surprising. In the past month the government has lost a deputy prime minister, reshuffled the ministry, imposed a ban on sex between ministers and their staff, and been mired in sexual gossip, innuendo and rumour. The Nationals have split like never before, the relationship between the Coalition leaders has ruptured, Michaelia Cash has smeared Labor staffers, and a perfect opportunity to pin down Shorten on the Adani coal project in Queensland has been lost.

Remarkably, Shorten felt confident enough yesterday to brazenly demand that the Prime Minister "needs to explain: does he like the project or doesn't he like the project?"

In short, the government looked like a rabble and deserved all the ridicule it copped. The small gains in bringing back lost conservative voters from One Nation were lost and the Coalition's primary vote is again at the unwinnable level of 36 per cent.

A febrile media, fed by politicians and legitimised by Turnbull's own ministerial code of conduct amendments for a ministerial sex ban, didn't help Barnaby Joyce or the Coalition. However, responsibility for the government's woes rests with the government itself.

The collapse of Joyce's marriage before the New England by-election last year and his involvement with a former staffer and now pregnant partner was known within the government and nothing was done to prepare for the inevitable publication of the facts and the questions about ministerial staffing and travel entitlements that would follow.

To make matters worse, there was no credible argument offered in defence or explanation to a public clearly disappointed and upset with the then Nationals leader, apart from the risible claim that the staffer wasn't Joyce's "partner" at the time — his wife was. It was an argument that Turnbull repudiated publicly yet which had been put out in his name.

No preparation, no contrition and a prolonged political scandal when there shouldn't have been one, and only angry, arrogant argument in response. The Joyce marital collapse spiralled into a vicious, humiliating and unworthy political atmosphere full of rumour, accusations and snide suggestions as frustrated ministers, such as Peter Dutton who frankly admitted his frustration, lashed out against Shorten and Labor. "We have sat there taking a morals lecture from Bill Shorten in relation to Barnaby Joyce over the last few weeks and people know there are a history of problems in Bill Shorten's personal life, in (Labor frontbencher) Tony Burke's personal life, and to be lectured by the Labor Party really sticks in the craw," Dutton said on radio 2GB.

Coalition ministers learned nothing from the Joyce debacle, as demonstrated by Cash's unseemly threat to "name names" of young female staffers in Shorten's office "about whom rumours abound". It was a bad error by the Jobs and Innovation Minister and she should have immediately withdrawn and apologised. Instead, Cash dissembled and argued. She tried to excuse herself by suggesting Labor senators were implying staff were being shifted to comply with Turnbull's ministerial sex ban in the office, which seemed to show a hypersensitivity to the issue.

She also argued that Labor's Doug Cameron was a "bully" who provoked her, another risible argument adopted by Turnbull and other Liberal ministers, which allowed Labor to swoop like a flock of seagulls on a hot chip.

Penny Wong and Tanya Plibersek were the first to demand an apology for all women working in parliament and, of course, Shorten pushed it on to Turnbull as a matter of leadership. Shorten also said Cash had "smeared" hardworking professionals in his office.

"I'm honestly shocked she hasn't said sorry," Shorten said. "It's this sort of nonsense that turns people off politics. We should be focusing on the things that matter to Australians, not hurling insults and making up stories about people who can't defend themselves."

In response, Dutton, the Home Affairs Minister, declared that the Coalition wasn't going to be "lectured to by this man" and accused Shorten of having had "affairs" and having a "history of problems" in his personal life.

While Turnbull adopted the argument in parliament that Cash had been bullied, he made a plaintive appeal to Labor to “mitigate any offence” by treating “this matter as having being dealt with”.

Playing to the gallery, Labor is relentless. It unleashed its seagull mobbing tactics to maximise media humiliation of the Coalition. Of course, Cash’s silly behaviour in trying to avoid television cameras as she returned to the Senate committee on Thursday — a committee that is fully televised, by the way — only made it worse for the government and will join the time-honoured bloopers of ministers walking into cupboards or being unable to open a door.

The whole episode smacks of a confused and dispirited government. Cash, who is still under pressure and awaiting a federal police investigation into the advance leaking to the media of a police raid on AWU headquarters, is clearly Labor’s next target for destruction. These gulls aren’t settling for one chip. They want the lot and the battered fish to boot.

Labor has the bonus of not only deflecting legitimate criticism but also burying the Coalition’s undoubted achievements with the farces played out before the nation. Turnbull has clearly struck a responsive chord with US President Donald Trump after a rocky start. He is standing firm on Chinese interference, the economy is doing well, the numbers on welfare are falling and job growth is strong.

But there are only three more sitting days for the House of Representatives before the budget in May, three days that are likely to lose more ground for the Coalition, three days that won’t provide time for a reasoned budget explanation, and three days likely to ensure Turnbull faces 30 losing Newspolls in a row, his own definition of leadership failure.

Turnbull holds on to the \$4 billion pumped-hydro scheme, Snowy 2.0, as if it were a talisman and hopes it will turn his fortunes. But if the government’s behaviour of late is any guide, he will have to do what Snowy 2.0 is meant to do — push water uphill.