

PM's problems of his own making

- The Australian, 12:00AM March 26, 2018, Ross Fitzgerald Columnist

Malcolm Turnbull is a single Newspoll away from failing the leadership test he himself set.

“We have lost 30 Newspolls in a row,” he said on the day of the coup that toppled prime minister Tony Abbott. “It is clear that the people have made up their mind about Mr Abbott’s leadership.”

If losing 30 Newspolls disqualified Abbott, it disqualifies Turnbull too. If the Prime Minister keeps his job, it will be because no one is stalking him in the way that he stalked the man he deposed.

These days Turnbull says that it wasn’t the polls that did Abbott in, even though he and his conspirators made so much of them to undermine him.

Turnbull told *The Daily Telegraph’s* Miranda Devine late last year he regretted citing the polls because that has obscured “the substantive reasons ... related to economic leadership and governance”. And he told Leigh Sales this month that the only test of leadership is “having the support of the partyroom”.

Turnbull’s problems are all self-generated. Indeed a fundamentally fatal flaw is that Turnbull has been utterly unable to unify the broader Liberal Party and stop defections to the right. Moreover, especially after his shabby treatment of Barnaby Joyce not long after calling the re-elected deputy PM a hero following the New England by-election victory, the PM is making a very poor fist of dealing with the Coalition.

By almost any test, Turnbull’s leadership has been worse than Abbott’s. While he has been behind in 29 Newspolls so far, the fact is that as of today Turnbull has trailed in the polls for 547 days as opposed to Abbott’s 491.

Clearly, Turnbull’s economic leadership and party management is inferior with his taxing, spending and regulating government, and he has chloroformed the partyroom by stalling political discussion in a way Abbott never did.

Abbott had serious achievements to his credit: stopping the boats, repealing the carbon and mining taxes, and finalising the big three FTAs. All the federal government’s big national security decisions were made under Abbott. These are unambiguous pluses Turnbull simply can’t match.

And by the most important metric of all for political leadership, Abbott won 25 seats from Labor in two elections while Turnbull has lost 14 seats in his one electoral outing so far.

Abbott achieved much despite constant leaking and sniping from his own team. Turnbull has achieved little despite a much less fractious cabinet and a much less critical media. A trade deal with Peru hardly cuts it. Most of the TPP work was done under Andrew Robb. The building industry watchdog was Abbott policy; and while Turnbull is taking the company tax cuts further than Abbott planned, he's scrapped the white papers that could have been the launching pad for serious reform of the way we're governed.

If the Liberal Party retains Turnbull, the country will get Bill Shorten as prime minister because there's no way such a tone-deaf and lazy campaigner can succeed against Labor, the unions, the Greens and GetUp! while defending a majority of just one seat.

I think there would be a partyroom majority for someone other than Turnbull, but not yet for any specific challenger. Abbott has always maintained that he wouldn't challenge and would have to be drafted.

Peter Dutton thinks that his job is to show loyalty to the leader, even though this particular leader doesn't deserve it. And Julie Bishop would kill to be PM, even if only for a few months, but her numbers are also Turnbull's.

Having made the catastrophic mistake of rolling a first-term, democratically elected prime minister, the Liberals are fearful of making another — notwithstanding that the only people who would really miss Turnbull are unlikely to be Liberal voters.

In any case, changing leaders won't win the election. To win, the Liberals need to create a much bigger policy difference from Labor. And every time Abbott suggests some product differentiation his senior colleagues join in to reject it.

Many voters don't like Shorten but they're hardly poised to re-elect the Turnbull government. What this Prime Minister didn't understand in September 2015 is that there is the world of difference between a government that's struggling in the polls because it's trying to do hard but necessary things like cutting spending, and a government that's simply struggling in the polls.

A Shorten win would certainly give us the most left-wing government in our history. But a Turnbull win — unlikely as that is — would validate the most left-wing Liberal government we've ever had.

Right now, the political choice is no longer between the centre-right and the centre-left; it's between the soft-left and the hard-left; between left and lefter, so to speak.

In the short term a Turnbull defeat would be bad for the country, but in the long term it might be the only way to stop both parties from drifting ever further to the left.

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