

Turnbull needs to win over Abbott and Bernardi



Redemption won't come easy for Malcolm Turnbull, pictured during question time in parliament this week. Picture: AAP

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This is the perfect weekend to consider redemption. Easter comes as Malcolm Turnbull nears the final station in his 30-Newspoll trial. He has not found a way to escape this suffering; the Prime Minister was reduced this week to a form of denial where his only response was to talk about something entirely unrelated. Newspoll will crow for the 30th time in just over a week.

This has been a sideshow, and an unnecessary one. Contrition and renewal are warranted from many other politicians, too, on a range of more substantial issues. But unless there is a miraculous salvation for Turnbull and he squares the numbers, the next poll will be far more damaging than many politicians and commentators seem to realise.

Yes, we know it is coming. Yes, we know Turnbull and his supporters will attempt to brush it off as meaningless. But it will be a turning point. It will make life even easier for Bill Shorten and see Turnbull consigned to the status of leader-on-notice.

The milestone will further reduce Turnbull and the Coalition's hopes of political recovery. It will move the national political debate into a new phase that largely

assumes a Coalition defeat and factors in a Shorten Labor government. A wily government might take advantage of that.

One Liberal MP recently told me the 30-Newspoll mark wouldn't create much trouble because there was no viable alternative leader within the Liberal Party — there was no spill in the offing. This is an insular view. There is someone widely accepted as a viable alternative prime minister, his name is Shorten.

This is the powerful argument Labor can make next week and beyond. Already dominant in day-to-day politicking, it will be armed with a compelling new case. The Prime Minister has failed by his own criteria, Labor will say, he should get out of the way.

It is worth refreshing our memories about exactly what Turnbull said when he challenged Tony Abbott on September 14, 2015: “The one thing that is clear about our current situation is the trajectory. “We have lost 30 Newspolls in a row, it is clear that the people have made up their mind about Mr Abbott’s leadership.”

Shorten can argue that by Turnbull’s own reasoning, he cannot win the next election because the public has made up its mind. So, Shorten will contend, the Prime Minister may as well go to the polls as soon as possible and let Labor get on with it.

This change in the political dynamic is likely to be stronger and more significant than most expect. It means Turnbull will need to find a way to deal with the Newspoll monkey on his back and find a way to reset his government. The status quo won't do.

Turnbull’s mistake was to cite Newspoll in the first place. Such references to the polling are fine for private conversations looking to wrangle the support of colleagues but employing such ephemera as a public justification was to ominously empower opinion poll data, invite fortnightly judgments of his own leadership and tempt fate.

Still, what’s done cannot be undone and, over 2½ years as Prime Minister, he needed to find a way to improve the polling or inoculate against this metric. Turnbull needed to admit his error, cast it as a silly bit of overblown rhetoric but remind us that his vindication came in his 2016 election victory. Unfortunately, his behaviour on election night — first bunkering down, then lashing out after midnight — spoiled his chance to frame the win and soak up the glory. Now he is reduced to defensive dodges on the issue.

It is becoming increasingly awkward to watch. As ever, he needs to learn to switch on to the front foot. He said Abbott couldn't win, many agreed with that assessment, and Turnbull went on to win. End of story. Next step: convince people you can win this time.

To do this, he needs some dramatic changes to take advantage of a prospective situation where Labor may come under some scrutiny because it is expected to win. Labor has been reduced to Occupy Wall Street-style rhetoric and policy that ought be exposed. Turnbull leads the nation at a time of tentative global and national economic recovery. Voters may want reassurance and steadiness rather than upheaval and risk.

Turnbull ignored invocations not to alienate his right flank. Take One Nation and Australian Conservatives votes out of the equation and his election win would have been stronger, his Newspoll pain would be over and his electoral prospects would be strong.

So if he wants to survive and win, he must embrace Abbott. He needs to bring his adversary back into cabinet and adopt some of his policy agenda. He might even look at wooing Cory Bernardi back into the fold with a position of authority. Contrition, reconciliation and redemption — unless Turnbull can demonstrate to conservative voters that he respects their views, can work with their valued advocates and adopt some of their policies, he will condemn the Coalition and the nation to Shorten's 21st-century experiment in 1950s-style, union-dominated, redistributive economic management.

Turnbull should take up Abbott's Senate reform agenda, attacking the hypocrisy of an ALP that still smarts from the Dismissal yet sees fit to deny a government its clear mandate on fundamental economic policies. He also needs a more conservative stance on immigration, injecting some nuance into a polarised debate while recognising some of the strains and acting to address them. He should ease back on numbers, act on integration difficulties and do more to spread the burdens and benefits around the nation.

On energy, he needs to sharpen the difference between Labor's climate-driven renewable overreach and his national energy guarantee compromise. If he won't withdraw from the Paris Agreement, he needs to make it clear he would rather not meet those emissions reduction targets than jeopardise our electricity affordability and reliability. The energy mess has been caused by government interventions — primarily the renewable energy target — and we are seeing even more interventions in stored hydro and solar projects. So if the Coalition needs to intervene to ensure there is sufficient baseload power in the national electricity market then so be it.

Turnbull needs to convince voters he is on their side. In talking to journalists he too often forgets he is supposed to be speaking through them to voters.

Transactional politics will not suffice — not when we have an unrepresentative and obstructionist Senate, a business community cowed by social media campaigns and union bullying, a political class out of step with the mainstream, and a Labor-Greens alliance challenging the nation's aspirational class and international competitiveness, at odds with 30 years of bipartisan policy development.

There will be a reckoning against all this; it is unavoidable. And there is no point in the Coalition waiting until it loses the next election to get involved in the realignment from opposition. It must strike out now to give itself some chance.

Oh, and just to show it means business, it could use the budget to cut the ministry by 25 per cent; streamline government and start to reduce the ludicrous number of ministers and assistant ministers. It would be worthwhile and mean that, apart from promising higher taxes and more expensive electricity, Labor also might be stuck with promising more ministers.

Redemption doesn't come easy. Ask John Howard or Paul Keating. Ask Steve Smith.

Turnbull can use his 30-Newspoll trauma to strike out afresh or he can trudge on and accept what is coming.