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DIS-CON NOTES

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Are they blind?

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A close reading of Graham Richardson's columns in the *Australian* already suggests the way that wind is blowing.

Against that background, the situation in Canberra is extraordinary: a Cabinet more 'moderate' (read, left of centre) than the ministry taken as a whole; a ministry more 'moderate' than the Liberal party room (and even more so than the joint party room); and a Liberal party room membership hugely more 'moderate' than those in a basically right-of-centre electorate whose votes have put them there. As Tony Abbott keeps on pointing out, if there is to be any hope of defeating Labor at the next election, the Coalition parties (both Liberal and National) should look to those issues now of greatest concern to voters. So what are they?

The Murdoch press is editorializing that 'next year's federal poll is shaping as a core economic contest between keener aspiration and stultifying taxation' (*The Australian*, 18/06/18), and that Turnbull's 'great victory' in passing his personal income tax measures, and his determination (so far unsuccessful) to enact his corporate tax cuts, will be central to that electoral contest. They are mistaken.

The now legislated personal income tax changes are of course welcome, as would be the proposed corporate tax cuts, but neither the former ('jam tomorrow') nor the latter ('jam the day after tomorrow') will have much impact on the next election outcome.

The three issues on which the Coalition has the potential capacity to differentiate itself from Labor sufficiently to win the next election are, respectively, energy policy, immigration policy (with its associated issues of housing costs and low-income earners' wage rates) and border protection.

But the Turnbull-led government (Peter Dutton apart) shows no signs of taking up any of these cudgels.

Fighting the next election on a 'keener aspiration' slogan will be as effective as was fighting the last one on 'jobs and growth'.

It is seven months since my last *Dis- Con Notes* ('No More Shilly-Shallying', 2/12/17). Meanwhile the Liberal party room indecision has continued. Last Monday's Newspoll – the 35th successive losing one under Malcolm Turnbull's leadership – shows the Coalition primary vote (the most important single metric) on 39 per cent, with Labor's on 37 per cent, and a two-party preferred (2PP) outcome of Coalition 49 versus Labor 51 per cent.

At the July, 2016 election, when Turnbull barely survived after losing 14 seats, the Coalition primary vote was 42.1 per cent; and since then, electoral redistributions in Victoria, South Australia and the ACT have effectively handed two seats (net) to Labor.

Since the Coalition was widely proclaimed to have won 'a great victory' during the previous fortnight in passing its personal income tax measures, and since Opposition leader Bill Shorten had suffered perhaps the worst week of his parliamentary career, the failure of those events to shift the needle on this Newpoll more than marginally surely tells us something. (The Fairfax group's Ipsos poll, taken a week earlier in the immediate aftermath of that 'great victory' but prior to Shorten's personal catastrophe, showed effectively 'no change').

None of this surprises me. Notwithstanding the Murdoch press's best efforts, the Coalition is going nowhere (except over the electoral cliff) so long as it sticks with Turnbull.

Dis-Cons such as myself are simply refusing to preference Liberals over Labor. Indeed, the only factor keeping the Coalition within even shouting distance of Labor today is Shorten himself. On that, more below.

Like the Murdoch press, the last thing I want is a Labor government, particularly one led by such a moral vacuum as Shorten. But unlike those visually impaired people in the Liberal party room, I am clear-eyed enough to discern where, absent any leadership change, things are headed.

Unfortunately, since that last *Dis- Con Notes*, the Liberal party room's eyesight problems have been compounded by a notable deterioration in the forcefulness and influence of the National Party leadership. Say what you like (as I certainly could!) about Barnaby Joyce, but there was no denying his capacity to size up policy proposals and deliver his verdicts on them in suitably earthy, comprehensible terms (cutting through such convoluted verbiage as now endemic in the so-called National Energy Guarantee dispute).

See, for example, his pungent immediate two sentence dismissal of the absurd Aboriginal 'recognition' proposals emerging from the Ayers Rock talk-fest on that matter last year.

'So what?', you might say; National party representatives have no votes in the Liberal party room. True; but that, I suggest, confuses form with substance. One of the plotters' great mistakes in overthrowing Tony Abbott was their failure to take any soundings in the National party.

After all, although Turnbull leads the Liberals, as Prime Minister he also leads the Coalition. When he takes the government over the cliff, the Nationals will go with him. It is not hard to imagine what Barnaby Joyce-led Nats would be saying privately in the corridors today to their Liberal colleagues: 'For God's sake, are you blind? Malcolm has to go; get on with it'.

A few Nats are in fact beginning to say that; but there will be no push to do so from their new leaders. Which brings the matter of Turnbull's leadership back to the Liberals.

Some Liberals are now hoping the July 28 by-elections may see them gain the seats of Longman and/or Braddon, providing 'momentum' for Coalition prospects. For a government to take a seat (or seats) from the opposition in a byelection would indeed be singular; but those thinking along these lines should be careful what they wish for! The most likely consequence of this new 'great victory' would be Bill Shorten's replacement by Anthony Albanese who, despite being of the Left, would command wider public support than Shorten.