

A two-horse race where the riders don't matter



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten.

Simon Benson, National Affairs Editor, 12:00AM August 13, 2018

The Turnbull government lacks policy coherence, party unity and remains crippled by a failure of political management.

The consensus is that it is sleepwalking to likely defeat.

The critical message from the electorate is this: the relative popularity of both leaders, or lack of it, is no longer the key driver of votes.

Bill Shorten proved this in the Longman by-election. People voted Labor despite him. Malcolm Turnbull has now discovered how fleeting (relative negative) popularity can be and the questionable relationship it may now have with voting intention.

The latest Newspoll, which now marks 38 losing Newspolls under Turnbull's leadership (#justsaying), reflects a dystopian reality. Whatever momentum Turnbull appeared to have cultivated this year has now stalled. Most of the gains in his personal numbers have evaporated overnight. His net negative satisfaction rating has blown out to minus 19. This isn't far off Shorten on minus 24.

This is a dramatic turnaround. Turnbull's satisfaction rating of 36 is now only four points ahead of Shorten's, having been 10 points two weeks ago. There is also now only one-point difference between the two leaders' dissatisfaction ratings.

This isn't down to the energy wars — they have been going on for two years. The Coalition has already been marked well down for this pantomime. Turnbull has now been mugged by the drought.

Again, this is an issue of appalling political management. For the past two weeks, all farmers have heard on the airwaves and through the bush telegraph is that Turnbull gave \$440 million to a bunch of bankers to manage the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and only an extra \$190m to farmers who haven't seen water for a year.

This message has clearly started to bite, Turnbull is suffering the consequences and the government has no plan to counter it. This has become a theme.

The school funding disaster speaks for itself. John Howard when talking to colleagues has made no secret of his disdain for the way the Catholic schools funding issue has been handled.

His public comments last week suggesting that Education Minister Simon Birmingham had failed to treat the sector with justice or fairness was subtle but devastating. It was a message to Turnbull to sort it out.

Faced with the same disaster, the former PM would have found a solution within a week.

But it has been going on for a year, has now dragged in the independent schools and no solution is yet on offer despite the obvious reality that it is going to involve throwing several billion dollars at the problem to make it go away.

In the end, the inability of the two major parties to sustain any long-term recovery in their primary vote reflects just how deep and entrenched the level of disenchantment is in the electorate. This has been borne out yet again in the latest poll numbers, which have both Labor and the Coalition on primary votes that neither has ever won government from.

Clearly crystallising nine months before the next election is a frustration in the community that neither of the major parties has the ability to deal with the issues they feel are important.

This lays the ground for a collective poor showing at the next election, which will again undercut the legitimacy of whichever side limps over the line.