

Newspoll: Voters savage Coalition chaos



Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison gives a press conference at Parliament House in Canberra.
Picture: Sean Davey

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Popular support for the Coalition has crashed to its lowest levels in a decade, with newly elected Prime Minister Scott Morrison faced with leading a shattered government out of the wreckage of last week's leadership coup and rebuilding a Liberal Party in crisis.

An exclusive Newspoll conducted for The Australian shows the Coalition's primary vote dropping four points to 33 per cent following the week-long chaos that ended Malcolm Turnbull's leadership.

It is now tied with the second-worst result, recorded in 2008 under Brendan Nelson as opposition leader, with Bill Shorten now elevated as preferred prime minister.

The "new generation" government will soon encounter a set of events not been seen by any politician for almost three decades.

The two-party-preferred split between the two parties has also blown out, from 49-51 in favour of Labor a fortnight ago to 44-56 now.

The horror poll comes as the fallout from Friday's leadership spill continued yesterday with Julie Bishop rejecting an offer to stay in cabinet and resigning as the foreign minister, Tony Abbott being denied a return to the ministry, and Peter Dutton reinstated as Home Affairs Minister following his failed tilt at the leadership.

In his first act as Prime Minister, Mr Morrison announced a virtual purge of cabinet, with Simon Birmingham moved out of the troubled education portfolio and Marise Payne shifted from defence. NSW conservative Angus Taylor will take on the nightmare job of fixing the government's failed energy policy.

The poll is the first to gauge the public response to the chaos of last week and shows a dramatic six-point spike in Labor's primary vote to 41 per cent — its highest in more than three years.

In the first head-to-head poll to test Mr Morrison's public appeal, Mr Shorten has emerged as the more popular leader, reversing a 12-point lead by Mr Turnbull two weeks ago and creating a six-point lead for the Opposition Leader over the new Prime Minister.

It is the first time since February 2015, in a contest against Mr Abbott, that Mr Shorten has been the nation's preferred prime minister.

The sharp swing away from the Coalition, which will confirm the worst fears of Coalition MPs, came as One Nation dropped two primary points. The results would be expected to reflect voter dissatisfaction at the government chaos of the past week and the removal of another prime minister.

The large swing to the opposition suggested a far more significant group of angry Coalition voters shifted their vote directly to Labor.

While the two-party-preferred vote is not as low as the worst result under Mr Turnbull's leadership, it would still result in the loss of at least 21 seats for the Liberal and National parties if replicated at an election.

Despite the Liberal Party being punished for removing a second prime minister, voters ranked Mr Turnbull behind Mr Morrison and Ms Bishop as the preferred leader.

Of the three candidates running in Friday's spill, Ms Bishop was preferred, with 29 per cent of voters backing her for the prime ministership compared with 25 per cent for Mr Morrison and 6 per cent for Mr Dutton.

But in a sign that the Liberal Party base may be persuaded to come back, Mr Morrison ranked significantly higher than any other potential candidate among Coalition voters, leading 38 per cent to Ms Bishop's 26 per cent, and 14 per cent for Mr Turnbull and 10 per cent for Mr Abbott.

A separate poll question showed Mr Morrison also had a base to build from in terms of policy, with a significant majority of voters — 44 per cent to 34 per cent — rating the former treasurer as more capable than Mr Shorten of handling the economy.

Mr Morrison yesterday said he expected people to be "absolutely disgusted" by last week's events, having claimed that he did not challenge Mr Turnbull and only put his hand up when he stepped down and the leadership was - declared vacant. "I think a lot of people would have been absolutely disgusted by it, but we are a great country," Mr Morrison said. "People are going to get back to where they have to have their heads and where they should have their heads and that is where I am going to get their heads.

"What needs to change in this place and what is expected of us in this space is a change in the culture and behaviour, and I said in the partyroom on Friday that issues of bitterness and these things that arise from these events, that has to go because Australians expect us to focus on them, rightly."

The Newspann was conducted between Friday and yesterday and surveyed 1783 voters following the election of Mr Morrison as the Liberal leader by the partyroom on Friday. But in a sign that the divisions within the party may continue, Turnbull supporter Senator Birmingham attacked colleagues for bringing down Mr Turnbull through "sheer perseverance". "They continued to chip, chip, chip away in a destructive way," he told the ABC. "We certainly saw a handful of individuals who decided to wreak havoc.

"We had Malcolm Turnbull's leadership confirmed and reindorsed just last Tuesday with a clear majority. "And yet those who wanted to wreak havoc continued to do so during the week. "That was terribly destructive and every single man and woman in the Liberal partyroom needs to put that type of behaviour behind us and make sure that we do unify for the future. "The

Australian people expect us to care about them and their interests, and Scott Morrison has made it abundantly clear that their jobs, their families, their homes, their futures, are his priority and they must be the priority for each and every one of us too.”

The Newspoll showed no change in support for the Greens, which remained on 10 per cent, with other minor parties and independents remaining unchanged on 9 per cent.

Mr Morrison, in announcing his new line-up late yesterday, said he was seeking to heal the wounds. “What we are doing today in pulling this team together is providing for stability, which is what Australians expect of their government,” he said. “But it does begin the process of healing. I’m not going to pretend to you that those things are fixed quickly. “But I do believe that this provides the opportunity, having reached out, having ruled a line, ensuring that the events of the past week go no further than that and I am confident that they won’t.