

PM has voters listening: time to step up on policy

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Provided Liberal MPs are prepared to put the national interest ahead of internal gripes, Scott Morrison has a fighting chance of leading the Coalition out of its electoral malaise. Doing so will require more than a change of style and philosophy, although these factors matter. Bold policy changes that differentiate his government from the opposition are more important, along with the ability to sell them to a weary electorate and highlight the costly pitfalls of the Labor alternative.

Today's move, when the Prime Minister will seek endorsement from cabinet to tear up the Paris emissions target legislation, is an excellent place to start. So was his decision to kill off the complicated national energy guarantee and prioritise cheaper and more reliable power. Voters are watching carefully, today's Newspoll reveals, which gives Mr Morrison a glimmer of hope.

After just a fortnight under his leadership, the Coalition has opened up a four-point lead over Labor as the party that would be best at maintaining reliable power supplies and keeping prices down. The government must hammer home that advantage, highlighting the expectations of experienced engineers, reported last week, that household power bills would soar under Labor's push to rely heavily on wind and solar power.

After energy, the major issues that concern voters, Newspoll shows, are hospitals and aged care, assistance to farmers, the budget deficit, national security and school funding. The Coalition deserves a credibility advantage on the deficit and national security, and is addressing drought assistance. It needs to defend strongly on health to insulate from Labor's inevitable scare campaign.

In a positive sign for the Coalition, Mr Morrison is regarded as less arrogant, more decisive and more in touch with voters than Malcolm Turnbull. The Coalition continues to face a mammoth task, however, in recovering from the leadership chaos that led to Mr Turnbull's demise. It trails Labor on the two-party preferred vote by 44 to 56, compared with 49 to 51 before Mr Turnbull was deposed.

But the fact Mr Morrison has already overtaken Bill Shorten as the preferred prime minister gives the Liberals good reason to rally behind their new leader and turn their attacks on Mr Shorten, whom most voters neither like nor trust. Before the last election, he said he "still thinks like a union organiser" and would take a similar approach to being prime minister. That is an alarming prospect.

Labor is committed to change the Fair Work Act imposed by Julia Gillard nine years ago, to usher in the return of collective bargaining and turn the clock back 40 years. The return of sector-wide industrial disputes, as Menzies Research Centre executive director Nick Cater writes today, would allow the militant Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, for example, to bring Australian ports to a standstill, disrupt supply chains and paralyse the economy.

Despite free falling membership — unions now represent fewer than one in 10 private sector workers — the movement's assets and revenue better suit the big end of town. The potential for job losses and hardship under a union-dominated Shorten government should be a potent line of attack for Mr Morrison and Industrial Relations Minister Kelly O'Dwyer. Such efforts, however, will amount to nothing if Liberal MPs are unable to put aside their selfish infighting when parliament resumes today for a crucial fortnight.