

Scott Morrison is running out of time to start anew

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As he measures poor Newspoll ratings against a federal election due within six months, Scott Morrison says he has a “big mountain to climb”. Within sight of the first budget surplus for a decade while unemployment is at a seven-year low and economic growth forecasts are again revised upwards, the Prime Minister ought to question why there is any hill for the Coalition to tackle. The chaos, tragedy and expense of Labor’s open border regime has been consigned to the past; free trade deals are in place with our major trading partners; vicious industrial disputes are happily absent; and few other nations can even aspire to such benign social and economic conditions.

Against this backdrop Labor leader Bill Shorten promises tax increases on income, dividends and real estate investments; additional costly climate interventions in the electricity market; higher government spending; and increased union power. So Mr Morrison needs to think carefully about why his government is on the ropes, and he needs to come out swinging.

The inescapable conclusion is that the Coalition is suffering from self-inflicted wounds leading to something of an identity crisis. Having dispensed with two prime ministers, the Liberal Party has demonstrated to voters that it lacks certitude on its direction — how can it ask for public confidence when it has been so unsure about itself? The Prime Minister has even squirmed and obfuscated when asked why he ended up in the job. When the role is all about showing the way, it seems an obvious mistake to assume the mantle of an accidental occupant.

There is no doubt that Malcolm Turnbull’s abandonment of Wentworth and sharp interventions have hurt his successor by highlighting disunity. There could be more to come. The only plausible response for Mr Morrison is to forge a clear path that can consign such distractions to irrelevance. With solid economic fundamentals, the government has much to build on. We know where public concerns are most acute: population growth is fuelling grievances; electricity and petrol prices are putting a squeeze on the cost of living; and low wages growth is constricting the spread of prosperity.

Mr Morrison can argue that Labor’s weakness on borders may create trauma again while its climate policies exacerbate power price rises and its high-taxing

and big-spending agenda in a re-regulated labour market may throw a wet blanket over the economy. But he needs a clearer plan of his own.

Mr Morrison does not need to don baseball caps and give us the thumbs up to convince us he is a suburban dad. We get it. He needs to use the authority of the top job to deliver the reforms and arguments this nation needs. As a Coalition Prime Minister there must be more he wants to achieve on tax reform or energy affordability.

He must be concerned about cultural issues such as our university sector rejecting a centre for Western civilisation or a Labor opponent refusing to call out Islamist terrorism. In short, Mr Morrison will win government in his own right only if he provides the central missing ingredient of this dismal past decade of politics: leadership.

Editorials