

Big risk is PM thinks he can perform a lone-hand rescue



Scott Morrison has tried to regain momentum by announcing an early surplus budget in April and, effectively, an election in May. Picture: Kym Smith

[Dennis Shanahan](#), Political Editor, 11:00PM November 30, 2018

Scott Morrison is virtually the last Liberal to think he can win the next election. The Prime Minister's determination and the strength of the economy are probably the only two potential positives for a Liberal Party facing a devastating defeat and self-immolation.

But even here there is extreme danger for the Coalition because Morrison is being forced into a flawed leadership position similar to that of his predecessors, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, who became detached from their parliamentary colleagues and Liberal voters.

Looking at an apocalyptic future with the potential for a rout at the election next year, which will decide not only the government for the next decade but also the nature of the Liberal Party, Morrison is up against a greater challenge than any Liberal leader has confronted since the horrific divisions of the 1980s.

The Coalition is facing not only a loss or disappointment next year but also the potential to hand Bill Shorten government, with a manageable Senate, well into the 2020s and an internal retribution of such ferocity that the Liberal Party, and the Nationals, will be remade — and not necessarily for the better.

A federal loss to the extent of the Victorian state Liberal catastrophe will wipe out not only the next generation of Liberal leaders and entrench the schism on the non-Labor side of politics, it also will surrender the Coalition's longest, strongest electoral appeal of good economic management.

In Victoria, the ALP has demonstrated that a radically left government can be re-elected on the basis of superior political skills, targeted infrastructure spending and the dumping of the mantra of addressing debt and deficit. Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, with the clear knowledge of a victory in hand, announced plans to double the state's debt to \$48 billion for more infrastructure, demonstrating a wanton disregard for limiting debt and being able to claim electoral endorsement for the last-minute announcement.

The lessons of Victoria have been underestimated by some federal Liberals and over-estimated by others driven to a mindless panic: witness the crisis meetings full of despair and doom, and the bitter and damaging recriminations. This includes Kelly O'Dwyer's epic summation of her colleagues as "anti-women, homophobic, climate-change deniers". Labor believes O'Dwyer, who cannot deny that she uttered the devastating assessment, has given the ALP election campaign an invaluable tool equivalent to the devastating Liberal missive to John Howard in early 2001 that described his government as being seen as "mean and tricky".

The defection of Victorian MP and Turnbull supporter Julia Banks to the independent crossbench, putting the Morrison government at risk of regular defeats on the floor of the house, accentuates the instability and panic after the Victorian election. Ironically, Banks's betrayal because the Liberal Party wasn't moderate enough bookended the earlier betrayal by Cory Bernardi in the Senate because the Liberal Party, under Abbott, wasn't conservative enough. This factional schism will not end with the departure of Turnbull and Banks or Abbott and Bernardi because it goes beyond the easy personification of the split within the Liberals.

The Opposition Leader is revelling in Morrison's weakness, accusing him of being a "part-time prime minister" who is running scared from the people in a "part-time parliament".

The brutal reality is that Banks's desertion has rendered Morrison effectively impotent and created a government that has power but can't act. The Coalition is at the mercy of Labor and the independents, particularly the rainbow coalition of women, Banks, Kerry Phelp, Rebekha Sharkie and the de facto matriarch, Cathy McGowan, who occupy former Liberal seats: Chisholm, Wentworth, Mayo and Indi. The first test of the numbers on the floor of the house this week

showed the four MPs were prepared to act strategically, withdrawing to the visitors chairs like a flock of colourful birds of paradise during a key division, and to demonstrate their strength and independence from Labor's tactics.

In the face of this disintegration, Morrison's reaction has been dogged determination, a hallmark stubbornness from his earlier years. The Prime Minister told the frothing Victorian MPs to "take a chill pill". He said he possessed the winning attributes of Andrews — a preferred leader, big infrastructure spending and a strong economy — and he personalised the election fight with Shorten. He also tried to regain momentum by announcing an early surplus budget in April and, effectively, an election in May.

Privately, Morrison also believes that part of Andrews's success was voter resistance to change in a time of instability, and he has started publicly describing Labor's plans as radical changes to a strong and growing economy. Despite the Coalition's continuing poor performance in Newspoll, Morrison's determination to fight on is based in part on his improving personal standing in Newspoll and signs Queensland is looking better for the Coalition.

Since becoming Prime Minister, Morrison has embarked on an energetic campaign to reconnect the Liberal government with the electorate and deliberately to behave in a way that is more connected with the concerns of everyday Australians, in contrast to Turnbull's image of being out of touch and "Mr Harbourside mansion".

Morrison has highlighted his modest background as the son of a policeman. He has talked about the drought, the plight of small business and cutting immigration. He has reinforced the positive message of a government that stopped the boats and ended the carbon tax, and he is trying to frame an economic narrative of good news.

This is working for Morrison because he is now well ahead of Shorten as preferred prime minister in Newspoll and is in a better position personally than Turnbull was in 2016 when the Coalition began its longest, lowest run of primary vote in Newspoll on record. But herein lies the real risk to any faint Liberal hope of winning next year: that Morrison believes it is all up to him, that there is no one he can trust and no one to whom he can spread the task of - recovery. What's more, he easily may think there is virtually no one who is prepared to believe it is better to hold government than try to rebuild while being in an opposition consumed by the smell of napalm. If all of this convinces him to go it alone, he will fail.

Apart from identifying with the Victorian Labor Premier and trying to take advantage of his popularity over Shorten, there is much more Morrison needs to take from the Victorian experience.

Even working on his advantage over Shorten in the polls has drawbacks. For a start, a Liberal prime minister identifying with a radical Labor premier is a diminution of his already corroded authority. But, more important, Morrison's vow to Shorten that the election is going to be about "me and you", dramatic and declarative as it is, puts the Opposition Leader on the same level as the Prime Minister and ignores the fact Shorten was more unpopular than Turnbull when he almost won the 2016 election. Shorten also has succeeded in by-election after by-election while not being the preferred prime minister and he has cemented his leadership because Labor has factored in his unpopularity.

Shorten's direct response in parliament, knowing that Abbott succeeded while unpopular, was a perfect riposte: "I thought even as remarkable as the part-time parliament was when the Prime Minister said: 'It's all about me and him.' No, Prime Minister. It's about the Australian people." It is fair enough to run a negative campaign about a leader — indeed, the Victorian Liberals failed through the years to nail Andrews — but semaphoring what you are doing is not the way to go about it.

By the end of the week, when presented with the opportunity to truly personalise the attack, Morrison responded to a blistering Shorten critique of a dying government with a sober, almost deadpan, iteration of the Coalition's economic success and delivery of election promises.

Morrison needs to broaden that argument into a strategy based on policies that have been worked through with his colleagues and give his fractured followers something to focus on apart from each other.

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