

Financial Review-Ipsos poll a test of nerve for Labor as gap narrows

AFR, Phillip Coorey, Political Editor Feb 17, 2019 — 11.59pm

One poll does not a comeback make, but the latest iteration of The Australian Financial Review-Ipsos poll will, at a minimum, create a frisson on Monday as Parliament gathers for one last week before the April 2 budget and then the election.

The two-party-preferred vote, which has Labor leading the Coalition by 51 per cent to 49 per cent, is the closest the parties have been since July last year, when Malcolm Turnbull was leader.

Taking into account the margin of error, this means the parties are again back to where we were seven months ago – pretty much statistically even, with the Coalition having the more popular leader.

If Labor won the election by 51 per cent to 49 per cent, it would be a close-run thing as to whether it could form majority government.

Subsequent polls will be watched closely to confirm whether there has been a closing of the gap, presumably on the back of the government wheeling out the scare campaign on asylum seekers.

If so, Labor faces a test of nerve.

There was a great deal of trepidation within the party last week over whether it had done the right thing by opening the door on boats, an entrenched political weakness which has cost it at least two elections this century.

The Coalition has been hoping for some time that if the polls close this will sow panic within the Opposition, fracturing the discipline which has been its hallmark for more than five years, not just on border protection policy but other contentious plans such as ending cash refunds for excess franking credits.

The poll offers Labor encouragement on that front, with the nation statistically split over the idea. Older voters oppose it, younger voters support it.

Before Christmas, Labor hardheads predicted the polls would close in the new year. They noted this had even happened for Julia Gillard in early 2013 before the fundamentals kicked in and the gap grew again.

Should that not be the case this time, Morrison would have to at least give thought to an early election.