

Newspoll: Scott Morrison nears the point of no return

Simon Benson, March 11, 2019

The Australian's National Affairs Editor Simon Benson says the last fortnight in politics has been 'as messy as the Wentworth by-election' after the recent spate of controversial comments, resignations and policy backflips. The past two weeks have seen the Coalition marred by the resignations of Christopher Pyne and Steven Ciobo as well as a challenge from outgoing MP Julie Bishop, who claimed she would have beaten Labor if she had been made Prime Minister during last years leadership spill.

The Prime Minister has also received a wave of criticism for comments on International Women's Day last week where he said he didn't want to see women rise 'only on the basis of others doing worse'. Mr Benson has told Sky News the public can see through the government performance, arguing if Australians 'wanted a pantomime, they'd go to the Lyric Theatre'. His comments come as the Coalition lose its 50th Newspoll result in a row. Image: News Corp Australia

Scott Morrison is approaching the point of no return. He either sticks with the current political strategy in the hope it will eventually start to bite, or he changes course before it's too late. Both options are loaded with risk. The polls suggest that whatever the Coalition is doing, it is not working.

But to restart the government agenda now would be ridiculous. There is no other narrative for Morrison. The economy and national security are what Coalition governments do. Cooler heads within government will be advising colleagues that the real driver of the polling numbers are the constant, and one would have to assume tactical, interventions.

Malcolm Turnbull's re-emergence into the political debate over climate change last week, and more importantly his grave-digging on last August's leadership spill, was doubtless damaging. Julie Bishop's contribution was more so. Bishop, rightly or wrongly, believes that had her colleagues not been so stupid, they would have elected her and assured themselves of victory.

The Nationals can take some credit for the latest results as well. Their demands for legislating "big stick" divestiture powers for energy companies, which the government had no prospect of passing, suggest the Prime Minister has even less authority over his Coalition partners.

It has been said that the Nationals behave the same way in government as they do in opposition, so it should be no surprise. This will be proven again today when Barnaby Joyce demands Morrison go to the election with a promise to build a coal-fired generator in Queensland somewhere.

Not that it had an effect on the polls but Julia Banks, elected as a Liberal MP yet who will end her term as an independent, confirmed last night that the ghosts of Morrison's ascendancy will haunt him until polling day when she too re-entered the frame to accuse Abbott of role reversal in leading the coup against Turnbull. These bombing raids serve only to remind people of the disunity and divisions within the Liberal Party and the Coalition more broadly and the image of unstable government.

The retirements of cabinet ministers Chris Pyne and Steve Ciobo had an impact. And Morrison would be the first to admit that if he'd had his time again he may have recalibrated his speech for International Women's Day.

Morrison will tell his colleagues that there is little they can do about the distractions other than to plough ahead. His argument will be that the agenda he has marked out is sound. But the task is becoming demonstrably more challenging.

The drop in the two-party-preferred vote to 46-54 will be demoralising. It suggests a well-established trend and, instead of tightening, the numbers are breaking the wrong way.

The danger now is that MPs turn to Josh Frydenberg and the April 2 budget. Never mind this is the Treasurer's first budget. For every dollar he puts in voters' pockets, Bill Shorten will put in double. There is no denying that the picture is bleak for Morrison.