

Newspoll: Coalition notches up 50th consecutive loss

Simon Benson, National Affairs Editor, 7:21AM March 11, 2019

Hopes of an electoral revival for the Morrison government on the back of a sharpened campaign against Bill Shorten's border protection credentials and class-war tax plans have been cruelled, with Labor extending its lead as the government notches up 50 losing polls in a row.

An exclusive Newspoll conducted for The Australian shows the Coalition losing ground for the first time this year following further cabinet retirements, a return to hostilities between Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott, and claims by Julie Bishop that she could have won the election if she had been made leader.

High drama for the Coalition over the past fortnight has been further fuelled by divisions over energy and climate change policy, with the Nationals threatening insurrection unless the government's "big stick" laws to punish power companies are revived.

Scott Morrison's visit last week to the Christmas Island regional processing centre in a bid to keep the pressure on Labor's softened border protection policy failed to ameliorate the damage, with the two-party-preferred vote widening from 53-47 a fortnight ago to 54-46 this week, giving Labor a clear eight-point lead over the Coalition.

With both leaders attending campaign launches for the NSW election yesterday, the appearance of divisions at the national level has led to a further one-point decline in the Coalition's primary vote, to 36 per cent.

The government will now pin its hopes on the April 2 budget for a political recovery before the expected May election, amid internal calls for unity.

With Labor's primary vote remaining steady on 39 per cent, the Coalition faces an election battle that may not be confined solely to marginal seats, with strategists fearing it will be forced into hard-fought contests further up the electoral pendulum. If distributed on a uniform basis across all seats, the 4.4 per cent swing on the last election result would result in the loss of 18 seats for the Coalition. Eight of those would be lost by the Liberal National Party in Queensland.

It is the worst result for the government since before Christmas, when it ended last year trailing on a split of 45-55.

Labor's primary vote in the latest poll also remains lower than its peak of 41 per cent in December, but is still regarded as being firmly in election-winning territory.

The largest movement was for Pauline Hanson's One Nation, which recorded a two-point jump in popular support at the expense of the Coalition and other minor parties. At 7 per cent, the conservative Queensland-based party polls just two points behind the Greens.

The results mark the 50th consecutive Newspoll in which the Coalition has been behind Labor, with 39 of those recorded under Mr Turnbull's leadership. Mr Turnbull had based his assault on Mr Abbott's leadership in 2015 on the basis of 30 consecutive losses.

Liberal Party colleagues of the Prime Minister conceded that his remarks at an International Women's Day event on Friday, in which he said women's empowerment should not come at the expense of men, may not have helped the Newspoll result. However, it had little impact on Mr Morrison's personal approval ratings, which improved a single point to 43 per cent, with a more significant fall in his disapproval numbers from 48 per cent to 45 per cent.

Against falling popular support for the Coalition, Mr Morrison's net negative satisfaction rating improved four points, to minus 2, and remains well ahead of the Opposition Leader, on minus 15. The Labor leader had recorded a similar turnaround, with a rise of one point to 36 in approval ratings and a fall of two points in disapproval.

Mr Morrison also maintained the lead over Mr Shorten as preferred prime minister, although the gap has narrowed two points to just seven points, with Mr Morrison falling a point to 43 per cent and the Labor leader rising to 36 per cent.

The personal ratings of both leaders has remained steady since the beginning of the year.

In setting the stage for a poor result, Liberal Party MPs had told The Australian prior to the Newspoll that if things did worsen it would be Mr Turnbull and Ms Bishop who were to blame. Mr Turnbull, after a recent absence from political commentary, re-entered the climate wars last week and attacked Mr Abbott in a series of tweets from London over his stance on coal-fired power.

He had also rekindled the leadership spill in an interview with a British broadcaster, in which he claimed his demise was a result of a special Australian “madness” and was based on a fear he would in fact win the election rather than lose it, a proposition that has been ridiculed by former colleagues.

This had followed Ms Bishop’s claims that if her colleagues had promoted her to the Liberal leadership in the August coup, she would have won the election for the Coalition.

Cabinet ministers have also privately rounded on their Coalition colleagues in the Nationals, who last week threatened a rebellion over energy.