

The public would want a new prime minister to change the government's agenda

Written by The Conversation

The federal Liberals are in a funk, with the increasing realisation that Tony Abbott could be unelectable in 2016. But getting out of their hole is about more than a change of face.

The options are stark: sticking with Abbott or moving to Malcolm Turnbull or Julie Bishop.

Even if Abbott never makes another “captain’s pick” it is unlikely he can significantly boost his popularity among voters, who didn’t much care for him in the first place.

Abbott’s foot is perpetually in his mouth. After his disastrous week, [on Friday he said](#) one reason his team members performed well was that they had a “very good captain”. On [Sunday he said](#) “government is not a popularity contest – it is a competence contest”. Was he channelling Julia Gillard’s observation that “I have always believed that chasing popularity is the death of purpose”? The flaw is that a leader without a modicum of popularity will eventually lose the chance to demonstrate competence (or purpose).

A jump – whether sooner or later – to Turnbull or Bishop will be highly tempting to many Liberal MPs. But going down that track would also have plenty of problems.

It’s not only that some Liberals recall Turnbull’s abrasive leadership style or, remembering that Bishop couldn’t handle the shadow treasurership, wonder whether she’d be up to the top job.

It’s also that Abbott’s troubles aren’t just appalling salesmanship and broken promises but the substance of the government’s policies, so that switching leaders would require the recalibration of its agenda.

Voters dislike the proposed Medicare co-payment, deregulation of university fees, planned changes that would leave pensioners relatively worse off, and talk of a possible higher or broader GST and a tougher industrial relations system.

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Turnbull or Bishop would be better advocates but it is still unlikely they could persuade people of the present policies [despite Turnbull's argument](#) in his just-delivered speech in the United States that people will accept unpopular decisions if they see the need for them.

Where would Turnbull or Bishop want or be able to reposition the government? Because they are part of a cabinet, we can't know at this moment what either stands for that's different from the government's current policies.

Given their more moderate outlooks, they might want to push towards the political centre – thus, Turnbull's speech highlighted that structural changes needed to be seen as “fair across the board”.

But the current Liberal Party has a strong rightward lean. Policy changes could face internal resistance. Any softening that would go down well with voters would likely get backs up in the Coalition's base.

And anyway, Turnbull in the US was strong on the need for a economic reform. Yet unless a new leader made significant changes, the voters could quickly turn sour after an initial honeymoon.

If Turnbull became leader, he'd have one very specific policy problem – what to do about “direct action”. We know he thinks this approach to climate change is (to adopt an Abbott phrase from another context) absolute crap. But Coalition troops would be outraged if he returned to advocating a market-based approach – while the public would know he was a hypocrite if he didn't.

The policy dilemmas are on top of the difficulty of sorting out which of Turnbull and Bishop would be top dog and who would be treasurer.

A new leader would have to ditch Joe Hockey, who might throw a hissy fit. If Bishop were leader, Turnbull would slot in as treasurer, but comparisons between the two could quickly start to be made. If Turnbull led, the treasurer might be Scott Morrison and there wouldn't be much

gain for Bishop in the shakeup.

Despite the fever running through the party, the situation still has a good way to travel. Abbott's Monday speech to the National Press Club, in which he'll offload some controversial policies and try to give his frightened followers a little confidence that he hasn't lost the plot entirely, will be important in determining whether his position deteriorates more by the time parliament resumes next week or stabilises at least for a while.

Assuming everyone takes a deep breath, eyes will turn within weeks to the "Abbott factor" in the March NSW election.

Premier Mike Baird is everything that Abbott is not, and Campbell Newman wasn't – a very presentable political product. But he has to sell a program for leasing electricity assets – and Queensland has shown the difficulty of that. And there will be the overhang of federal issues and leadership. Abbott can't be banned from NSW, his home state – that would be a damaging issue in itself. If Baird, who is expected to be returned, had a near-death experience, the consequences for Abbott would be obvious.

Meanwhile, Abbott is being undermined by the very declarations of loyalty and assessments about his backing that are coming from colleagues. When possible replacements swear support and others roll out to insist there is nothing to see, that itself creates something to see.

Bishop and Turnbull were formulaic. "The Prime Minister has my support," said the Foreign Minister, while Turnbull said: "The Prime Minister has my support. I'm a member of the government and he has the support of the government". Attorney-General George Brandis sounded like a lawyer struggling with a bad brief when he tried to dismiss the leadership issue as muttering and chatter.

New minister Josh Frydenberg hit the mark when, asked on Sky whether there would be a challenge, he said: "I don't have a crystal ball". Neither does anyone else in the Liberal Party.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any

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