

Abbott gets poll help as Bishop complicates leadership question

Written by The Conversation

As Liberal MPs gather for more testing days in parliament, a [Fairfax/Ipsos poll](#) showing improvement in the ratings of both the Coalition and the prime minister should help Tony Abbott fireproof himself for the moment.

The two-party vote has the Coalition up three points since January – it now trails Labor 49-51%. The Coalition's primary vote is 42%, up four points, with Labor falling four points to 36%.

Abbott's disapproval has fallen five points to 62%; his approval has climbed three points to 32%.

Bill Shorten's approval is down and his disapproval up; while he leads as preferred prime minister, 44-39%, the gap has narrowed with Abbott rising five points and Shorten falling by six points.

The trend of the poll (of 1406 voters and taken Thursday to Saturday) is similar to that of [last week's Newspoll](#), enabling Abbott backers to argue that the latter was not just a one-off correction and the prime minister should be given a reasonable time to show he can improve.

A push last Thursday by some Turnbull supporters to get a vote this week – based on the argument it should be before the NSW election and the budget – appears to have receded, as the situation has become more complex with signals from Julie Bishop that she would be a candidate if the race came on. The Bishop view is that the party would want a genuine contest, rather than a stitched-up deal, if there was to be a leadership change.

Having Bishop potentially in the field imposes a restraint because of the uncertainty of the result, strengthening the argument for waiting-and-seeing. The caveat is that the Liberal Party at the moment is highly unpredictable, making people reluctant to totally rule out anything.

In a three way contest – Turnbull, Bishop and Abbott – anything could happen.

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Around the time of the unsuccessful spill motion it seemed Bishop would not run if the leadership were opened.

If the leadership uncertainty continued for a considerable time, Social Services Minister Scott Morrison could also come into contention as a candidate favoured by the right and pushed by conservative commentators.

Turnbull said on Sunday that Abbott had his “absolute support. People should assume, everyone should assume, Tony Abbott will lead the Liberal party from now right through to the election”. Campaigning for the Baird government, Turnbull said the key focus for the next four weeks was the NSW election on March 28.

In the Fairfax poll Turnbull remains the preferred Liberal leader, on 39%, up four points since November.

Bishop's support has increased by four points to 24%; Abbott has fallen one point to 19%.

Among Coalition voters Abbott leads Turnbull 38-30%, with Bishop on 21%. But Abbott's rating has fallen three points among these voters since November while Turnbull's support has risen by six points and Bishop's by two points. One of the challenges for Turnbull is that he is consistently more popular with Labor than conservative voters.

Bishop gets more support from women voters (30%) than from men (19%).

When people were asked to compare the attributes of Abbott and Turnbull, the prime minister came off poorly across the board.

Abbott lagged behind Turnbull on the ability to make things happen (43-56%); having a clear vision of Australia's future (42-58%); competence (39-74%); having a firm grasp of economic policy (38-70%); trustworthiness (36-55%); openness to ideas (35-69%); being a strong leader

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(33-60%); having a firm grasp of social policy (29-64%); and having the confidence of his party (21-52%). Abbott was seen as more inclined than Turnbull to be easily influenced by minority groups (30-23%).

Abbott's rating has fallen generally on the attributes since the question was last asked in December. He has tumbled 32 points on having the confidence of his party, and 11 points on competence.

Cabinet meets on Monday, when it is expected to review the general political situation as well as dealing with specific items as Abbott seeks to shore up his position with policy initiatives.

Abbott is set to make an announcement soon on the fate of the unpopular Medicare co-payment, with speculation that it will be ditched. Consultations have been underway with the medical profession. He said at the weekend: "Those consultations are continuing, but at some point in time I'd certainly expect to have more to say." Dumping the co-payment is complicated because of the revenue forfeited and that proceeds were supposed to go into a new medical research fund.

A new commitment to Iraq, initially foreshadowed by New Zealand Prime Minister John Key, is due to be announced this week. On Thursday, the Intergenerational Report, underlining the budgetary challenge over several decades, will be released.

On Sunday, appearing for Clean Up Australia Day, Abbott was again bombarded with leadership questions. Asked whether it would not be in the country's best interests for him to just stand down, he said: "This is just recycled rubbish and on a day like Clean Up Australia Day, let's put it in the bag and get rid of it".

Assistant Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, asked on the ABC whether there was any prospect of the leadership coming to a head again this week, said: "I hope not. Look, there's certainly going to be members of my own side who want to see a change in leader.

"But I don't think anything the prime minister does will convince them that he should stay in the

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role.

“If he delivered the Gettysburg address, if he won a Nobel Prize, they’d still take the position that they want a change in leader.” But Frydenberg said he believed “that is a minority view”.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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