

It's no wonder Malcolm Turnbull has been desperate in parliament's final fortnight of 2016 to get some legislative wins. Five months after the election, voters are frustrated by what they see as lack of progress from the government and deeply disappointed with Turnbull.

These messages came from focus group discussions conducted last week by Landscape Research for University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis. They no doubt reflect what party polling would be saying.

The Landscape research, done in Brisbane with 26 people aged 19-70 from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, who were split into five groups, was part of a study exploring the relationship between trust in the political system and attitudes to democracy.

The research showed how out of touch federal politicians are with a critical and disillusioned electorate. Yet while the message is clear that people are sick of how they carry on, the politicians seem unable to change their behaviour. This week's fiasco over the backpacker tax was a case study. It finally ended in a government-Greens deal late on Thursday after days of unedifying shenanigans all round.

The focus groups found voters are picking up strongly on divisions within the government, and believe his party is constraining Turnbull.

"The ongoing instability of the Turnbull government due to its narrow majority and internal divisions, as well as the adversarial nature of the current political environment, serves to reinforce voters' views about politicians – they care more about their own political point-scoring and staying in power than working together for the good of the nation," the Landscape report said.

As one participant put it: "They take a very adversarial approach to each other and they are not actually trying to solve the problems"; another believed the government "isn't being cohesive because they're not strong enough. They're fighting amongst themselves and they're not listening to the general population."

Grattan on Friday: Can Malcolm Turnbull persuade sceptical voters he is delivering?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

These voters were highly predisposed not to trust politicians. They didn't think politicians could get things done because they believe they have a track record of failing to deliver on undertakings. They see career politicians as out of touch with their concerns.

"They are white men in suits ... If they can keep benefiting themselves, I don't matter," said a young female hospitality worker.

A retired male customs officer said: "Our political system has lost the plot a bit and no political party is winning a clear majority to make the decisions for which they were elected. They're hamstrung all the time and having to bicker and fight with the Senate all the time to get things through."

Many participants had lost hope that Turnbull might drive positive change. They blame what they regard as the government's stagnation on his leadership, and are very aware of his inability to get his party to go along with him.

"He has to do what his party wants – and his party wants different things to him," said one participant. According to another: "If Malcolm could, he would fulfil all his promises, but he's strong-armed by his party."

"When Turnbull says this and that and then ends up doing nothing you just have hatred for him because he's the prime minister of your country and you can't look up to him because he didn't do what he was supposed to," said a young female marketing account executive.

As was found in University of Canberra research in the Victorian seat of Indi before the election, these Brisbane voters don't like Bill Shorten much. Also as the Indi study found – when the question was hypothetical – they regard Turnbull as the better leader to deal with Donald Trump.

In the Coalition partyroom this week, Queensland Liberal National Party MP Michelle Landry warned that core supporters were leaving "in droves" for One Nation. Canvassing Pauline Hanson, some in the focus groups saw the strong showing by her and other independents as a

response to disenchantment with the major parties.

“It’s disenfranchisement. People really want change and feel like they’ve been completely let down by the government for so long, they feel like they have no power and no say,” said a 22-year-old university student.

Another participant said: “People have had the major political parties. They know Pauline Hanson’s never going to govern in her own right. But giving people like the Hansons and Xenophons and Derryn Hinch a vote is like giving the majors a kick in the pants and saying ‘get your act together’.”

Others believed people could relate more readily to these candidates than to career politicians (even though Hanson surely falls into the latter category). “The thing we all know about Pauline is that she ran a fish and chip shop. The thing we know about politicians is their political careers.”

But these Queenslanders see Hanson as a poor alternative. “The election showed people are fed up with the major political parties but voters did the wrong thing. They made a mistake by voting for Pauline Hanson because she doesn’t have any real policies,” said a retired nurse.

Others thought Hanson’s popularity was based on a reaction to political correctness and the freedom she gave people to air personal views aligned with hers.

There was also ridicule of Hanson as a joke and a national embarrassment, while some had strong views on what they saw as her despicable racism.

The Landscape report had some sharp observations on political trust generally.

“At the heart of it, electors expect politicians to do the job they were elected to do.

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"When politicians and political parties do not deliver on their policies (the reason for non-delivery doesn't matter), when they waste time (such as bickering among themselves or being badly behaved in Question Time), when they are more interested in themselves than the good of their constituents or the nation (such as short-term policies designed to get them re-elected), when they won't take responsibility (blaming each other or someone/something else), or when their focus is trying to cling onto power rather than govern (such as dumping prime ministers mid-term), they demonstrate they are not doing the job they were elected to do."

In these circumstances, people perceive important things are being left unaddressed and see the nation as stagnating. As well, some behaviour by politicians is seen to lead to instability in government. The combination causes people to feel uneasy, and concerned for the future.

"That politicians make them uneasy and feel let down makes voters cranky at their elected representatives.

"So it is not simply that citizens do not trust politicians, or that they are disillusioned with the behaviour and lack of progress. Voters are punishing politicians and political parties for making them feel uncertain, betrayed and scared for the future," the report said.

As parliament wound up, Turnbull listed various pieces of legislation that had been passed and declared: "We are getting on with our job of delivering on the promises we made to the Australian people ... Right across the board, whether it is national security, economic reform, industrial reform or here [with the backpackers tax], in dealing with important tax reform, we're getting on and getting the job done."

The next year will test whether he can convince people of that.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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