

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull handled the Barnaby Joyce affair badly and his ban on ministers having sex with members of their staff is risible, according to “soft voters” in focus groups held last week.

The research, done ahead of the South Australian election but canvassing views about the federal leaders as well as state issues, also found people critical of Bill Shorten, especially disdainful of what they saw as his “opportunistic” position on the Adani coal mine in Queensland.

Four focus groups each of nine or ten “soft” voters – those who had not decided who to vote for in next Saturday’s election – were conducted on March 7 and 8: two each in Adelaide and the regional city of Murray Bridge. The work was done by Landscape Research on behalf of the University of Canberra’s [Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis](#).

These soft voters, meeting on the heels of Turnbull’s [Newspoll slump](#) in the wake of the Joyce affair, believed Turnbull misjudged the public mood on the issue, didn’t handle it well, and let it drag on to become much more of a distraction than it should have been.

“I didn’t think it was even any of his business to be quite frank,” a 61-year-old male real estate agent said. “He wasn’t even in the same party.”

Many soft voters wonder why Turnbull didn’t simply get Joyce to keep his mouth shut.

A retired man in Murray Bridge said that “publicly dissing Barnaby ... was bad”, while a customer services manager from the town thought “he should have got rid of him quicker”.

As for the sex ban: “That rule about no bonking in parliament was an absolute joke,” an Adelaide male security officer declared, while a social worker in Murray Bridge thought it “probably inflamed the situation”.

'Soft' voters scathing about Turnbull's handling of sex in politics: focus group research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

A young woman from retail was sceptical about implementation. "It's going to happen. They can't stop it."

A retired female cook summed up the cynicism: "I mean, for goodness sake!", while another woman said: "At the end of the day does it really matter? Just focus on what you need to focus on and stop focusing on people's sex lives."

When it comes to representing Australia on the world stage, these voters prefer Turnbull over Shorten. But more generally, many see Turnbull hamstrung by his party, weak and wishy-washy because he can't free himself and be true to his own beliefs.

There is a strong sense that Turnbull's perceived lack of leadership has let down many voters who expected big things from him.

"There's no passion anymore," said an Adelaide pensioner. A retired male teacher thought he was "not a conviction politician. You don't feel he's got a set of beliefs."

An older Murray Bridge participant struggled with the gap between Turnbull's words and actions, as shown by recent events.

"He comes across as a very decent sort of man. He made a statement at the beginning of the year about his aspiration for things to be better in parliament. And then we have Michaelia Cash getting out of her tree and he virtually starts making excuses for her, and then we've got Peter Dutton and a couple of other ministers being very, very personal about the marital affairs of others, and he lets all that happen in spite of what he's already said."

Given Turnbull is seen as still preferable to his opponent, soft voters would like him to improve and "act like a leader", and especially to gag the voices behind him, who they regard as undermining him.

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But there is doubt that he can break through. A young male factory worker thought “he’s had too many scandals in his party and it’s starting to take effect on how people see him. Like, he has no control over his party. And people are thinking, maybe he’s not cut out for the job.”

Shorten is seen as having sat back and gloated at the government’s troubles. But there was a surprisingly high unprompted awareness of his “opportunistic”, “two-faced” position on Adani. Shorten’s union association also lingers in people’s minds.

A young Adelaide bank worker observed: “Recently he went up to Queensland and said he was in favour of the Adani coal mine and then he was in Melbourne and said he was against the coal mine. Flip-flops.”

Another Adelaide voter parodied Shorten’s statements on the project: “Yeah but, yeah but ... we won’t tear the contract up but ...”

For both leaders, these soft voters have become an unforgiving lot – which in part explains the attraction of casting a protest vote.

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

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