

View from the hill: An ugly set of numbers triggers havoc in the Turnbull government

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Barnaby Joyce, a National, hasn't a vote for the Liberal leadership. But he's a man of opinions and now he's on the backbench there are no restraints on his expressing them.

On Monday night, amid the feeding frenzy over [Newspoll](#), Joyce declared that if, as Christmas approached, polling indicated Turnbull was heading to electoral defeat, he should call it quits. There was an obligation "not to drive your party or the government off a cliff," he [told Sky](#).

A new unhelpful spot fire erupted into flame.

With the fateful 30th Newspoll finally out there, the government on Monday descended into an orgy of destructive self-indulgence. It was a collective performance made up of individual bitterness, tactical misjudgement, and plain ill-discipline. Just the sort of thing to further disgust a public already turned off by the shambles of Canberra.

For Abbott, Monday was the occasion for the primal scream. It might be two-and-a-half years since Turnbull seized his job, but the former prime minister's pain hasn't abated a jot, nor his sense of what he sees as the injustice delivered to him.

As he pedalled through the Latrobe Valley, Abbott [told 2GB](#) it was for Turnbull to explain why the 30 lost Newspolls measure that he invoked in his 2015 challenge "applied to me but shouldn't apply now."

And then there were the other points Turnbull had raised back then - about the need to restore cabinet government, and the lack of an economic narrative.

"Well, I ran a perfectly orthodox cabinet government", Abbott insisted; as for having no clear economic narrative, "I completely reject that. There was a very, very clear economic narrative under my government." For good measure, he threw in a defence of the 2014 budget - which in

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fact began his political demise.

On the policy front, he topped his call for the government to build a coal-fired power station by suggesting it should nationalise the Liddell power plant, owned by AGL, which is resisting selling to another company despite sustained bullying from the government.

Given everyone knew Abbott would be grabbing the spotlight after Monday's Newspoll, the government had to make a tactical judgement about how best to counter.

It could keep a low profile, with minimal prime ministerial and ministerial appearances. While that would give maximum room to Abbott, it would also avoid further fanning the poll story. Or Turnbull and his ministers could confront the bad poll day full on. That was the course chosen – and it was hard to see the sense of it.

Ministers were out everywhere, backing Turnbull. That just gave the impression that his leadership was in need of protection, despite there being no challenge.

In a round of media appearances, Turnbull said (for the umpteenth time) that he regretted citing Newspoll, declared he had the backing of his colleagues, and submitted himself to some humiliation.

[On 2GB](#), Ben Fordham announced he had invited listeners to say what he should ask Turnbull. "I hate to tell you PM: the overriding response was, 'when will you resign?'" Fordham told his guest, with the cameras looking on.

"Oh really," Turnbull said. "Well, well the answer is I'm not, I am not. I am going to go to the next election and win it".

Then there was Wayne on the talkback line. "I'm a rusted on Liberal and you've taken the party - you nearly lost the unlosable election. I find you politically inept, and basically you've taken the

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party in my view too far to the left and I think you should do the honourable thing and resign, put it to a party vote because quite frankly if we go to an election with you we are doomed as a party”.

“Well thanks Wayne for the advice,” said the PM. “I don’t propose to take it, however.” Turnbull then went on to invite Wayne to tell him how he had taken the party to the left, and argue the toss with him.

Now one can say it’s admirable that a leader gets out and deals with criticisms. But Monday didn’t seem the day for maximum exposure.

Or for canvassing long-term leadership ambitions, as did Peter Dutton. “I think people are best to be honest about their ambitions”, the Home Affairs minister [told 3AW](#) . His comments were in the context of reaffirming his loyalty to Turnbull and were not new, but such candour just set off another spot fire of questioning, that soon reached Josh Frydenberg and Scott Morrison, both of whom acknowledged the batons in their knapsacks.

The 30th Newspoll was destined to be difficult. Abbott was determined to make it so. Joyce is a loose cannon. But the strategy adopted by Turnbull - for he and his ministers to try to control the story by swarming all over it - simply made him a bigger target. It displayed a lack of political nous but also suggested he is feeling more than a little rattled by the situation in which he finds himself.

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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