

View from The Hill: Furious voters deliver their verdict, with government's huge Newspoll plunge

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The voters have screamed their anger about the Liberals' self-indulgent blood letting, in the first Newspoll after the coup. Labor's two-party lead over the Coalition has jumped to 56-44%, a massive change from the 51-49% margin only a fortnight ago.

While Bill Shorten could never get his nose in front of Malcolm Turnbull as "better prime minister", the opposition leader holds a 39-33% lead over new prime minister Scott Morrison. Two weeks ago Turnbull had a 12 point advantage as better PM. This is the first time since February 2015 that Shorten has led on this measure.

The Coalition's primary vote has plunged 4 points to 33%; Labor's vote has increased from 35% to 41%, in the Australian's poll, which comes as Morrison moved quickly to announce his ministerial team.

The new line up sees the man who swung the wrecking ball to destroy a prime minister restored to cabinet, while on the backbench, on her own choice (and within cooe of Tony Abbott, who didn't get the call to a ministry), will sit the Liberal woman who is highly popular with the public.

Many would believe Peter Dutton's inclusion defies decent political standards, after the damage he inflicted. Julie Bishop's absence squanders political advantage. We are indeed living in strange times.

Normally an unsuccessful challenger would put himself, or be put, onto the backbench. But the strength of the hardline conservative forces would have made it impossible to exclude Dutton from the cabinet, even if Morrison - who denied him the prime ministerial prize - had wanted to.

So Dutton returns to home affairs. But the immigration section of the portfolio has been hived off to another minister. The "mega" department that Malcolm Turnbull constructed to keep his ambitious minister happy won't be quite so "mega" now.

By the change, Morrison has partially clipped Dutton's wings while also signalling his own belief

in the economic benefits of immigration.

But he has also put “population” explicitly into a ministry, with cities, urban infrastructure and population to be held by Alan Tudge, and declared that Tudge will be dealing with “congestion”.

So we'll see where the immigration debate goes from here. The conservatives are not likely to give up their battle to lower the intake as much as they can.

It was Bishop's decision to leave the frontbench, and maybe it was always going to be this way once she lost her bid to lead. But she might have also been influenced by being humiliated – she polled very badly because of the push by the anti-Dutton forces to make sure Scott Morrison finished second, not third, in the first round.

In the end, Bishop's argument that her popularity, demonstrated in the polls, could hold seats counted for nothing in the ballot.

The new cabinet has one more woman than the old one, bringing the number to six. But of course there is no woman in the leadership team now. Once again, the Liberals find themselves short on the gender front.

The absence of Bishop leaves a gaping hole, both in Australia's foreign profile and in the Liberals' domestic fire power.

Her energy, style and years in the job maximised Bishop's role internationally. Just as importantly, she did a great deal of the heavy lifting domestically - in the media, in party fund raising and in campaigning in marginal seats.

However adequately Marise Payne performs abroad, she is not going to fill Bishop's shoes at home. Since she has been in cabinet, Payne has been rarely heard publicly outside her portfolio (and seldom on that), carrying none of the government's general campaign in the media.

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Morrison's ministry and his comments when announcing it tell us his orientation in the energy area. He has split energy and environment, put the conservative Angus Taylor - who recently said "the obsession with emissions at the expense of reliability and affordability has been a massive mistake" - in charge of energy.

Morrison said the priorities are reliability and despatchable power, and that Taylor is to be minister for bringing down prices. But this surely is only the beginning of the story. Morrison will need to have a position sooner rather than later on emissions, and he will have to respond on the conservatives' push for Australia to withdraw from Paris.

If anyone had any doubt that the wrangling will continue, Nationals backbencher George Christensen quickly tweeted: "Looking forward to @ScottMorrisonMP & @AngusTaylorMP getting baseload underwriting scheme underway ASAP to develop new coal-fired power stations, inc one in Nth Qld. More is needed: major equity fund for new coal-fired power & abandon costly green treaties, mandates & subsidies."

Meanwhile, Morrison is beginning to broaden his image and fashion his leadership persona in a rather unexpected way – via the drought.

On the day he was elected he said the drought was top priority. On the following day he was pictured meeting the co-ordinator of the drought effort. On Sunday he was on the Australia All Over program (when was the last time a PM did that?). He also named Barnaby Joyce "special envoy for drought". On Monday he visits Queensland areas in drought.

Struggling farmers may be impressed by this attention, or they may be cynical about it.

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