

# Budget sell flops, back to boats

Exclusive

Phillip Coorey

The federal government has failed to convince the public of the merits of its budget, helping explain why it has shifted its election message to a scare campaign over asylum seekers and a Labor/Greens alliance.

As Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull spent Wednesday defending controversial comments by Immigration Minister Peter Dutton concerning illiterate and innumerate refugees taking Australian jobs, comprehensive research into the budget sales job, conducted by veteran pollster John Scales and his company JWS Research, finds the budget has many positive measures which the government has failed to sell.

Consequently, the overall view of the May 3 budget – which was the policy springboard for the Turnbull government's election campaign – remains negative with just 17 per cent saying it was good for them personally and 37 per cent saying it was poor. Only 21 per cent believed it would be good for the country and 37 per cent said it would be poor.

But when individual measures are put to voters, there is very strong support for some. For example, the extra \$2.9 billion in health funding is the most popular with 75 per cent support and the new \$840 million PaTH program to help unemployed youth has 65 per cent support.

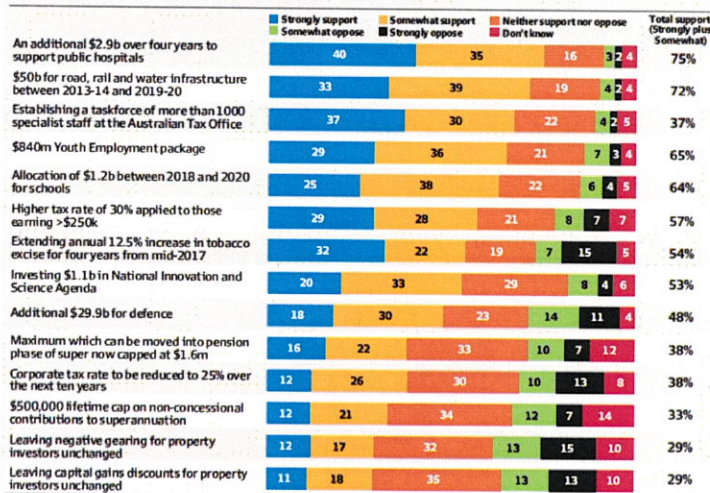
Additional school funding is popular (64 per cent), as is the crackdown on multinational tax avoidance (67 per cent), the budget's infrastructure package (72 per cent) and the \$1.1 billion innovation package (53 per cent).

The two issues that have hogged the headlines – the company tax cuts and the allegedly retrospective elements of the superannuation crackdown – are among the most unpopular measures, suggesting Labor has framed the budget for the government with its criticisms of both measures.

The capping of superannuation

## Voter views

Support for measures contained in the federal government's 2016 budget (%)



SOURCE: JWS RESEARCH TRUE ISSUES SPECIAL RELEASE

retirement accounts at \$1.6 million has 38 per cent support and the \$500,000 lifetime non-concessional cap has 33 per cent support.

Despite Mr Turnbull and Treasurer Scott Morrison spending the first week selling the benefits of the company tax cuts, the centrepiece of the budget's economic message has just 38 per cent support. Conversely, the decision to leave alone negative gearing and capital gains tax deductions for investors attract just 29 per cent support each.

Mr Scales deduced from the research that the government's aim to present

the budget as an economic plan rather than a list of measures had not worked.

"At the micro level, that's been understood [but] that's been missed by the general population," he said.

"They're asking what is in it for them, they're saying 'there's nothing in it for me.'" Mr Scales said hammering the asylum seeker drum would not sustain the government for the duration of the campaign and it "needed to get back and sell the main economic agenda".

Towards the end of the first week of the campaign, the government shifted its message towards boats and exploiting

dissent within Labor over its support for the Coalition's tough policy stance.

Mr Turnbull began muscling up on the campaign trail this week and on Tuesday night, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton caused outrage.

In attacking the Greens for wanting to bring in 50,000 refugees, Mr Dutton said many refugees would not be "numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English", would take jobs from Australians and be a drain on welfare and Medicare. Labor leader Bill Shorten slammed Mr Dutton's "deeply divisive and offensive remarks".

## CAMPAIGN TRAIL



## DATA WATCH

Top election issues online.

- Economy: 55%
- Budget: 45%
- Accountability Governance: 28%
- Social Issues: 18%
- Foreign Policy: 16%
- Benefits Social Welfare: 15%
- Environment: 14%
- Terrorism Surveillance: 4%

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## Docks, tinnies on agenda as Turnbull sticks with Dutton

### #afronthetrail

Primrose Riordan

Coalition leaders visited two ports on Wednesday to highlight the asylum seekers issue, concerned people aren't tuning in to the campaign.

Indeed, watching the Prime Minister making his way through a shipyard being followed by cameramen getting video "grabs", one dock worker quipped: "The only thing I want to grab is a tinnie on the way home."

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton's latest unsubtle intervention on refugees – saying a greater intake would threaten Aussie jobs – worked, and turned back every other item on Wednesday's campaign agenda somewhere north of Sri Lanka.

The chaos began in far north Queensland when a reporter asked if Malcolm Turnbull would be slapping down his minister for the refugee comments – which he declined to do.

The mics were then shoved under Senator Ian Macdonald. Yet to read whether Mr Dutton was referring to refugees coming to Australia via the UN or by boat, the senator jumped behind the minister and said his comments were "matters of fact".

Despite attempts by Mr Turnbull to focus on questions of the Coalition contributing \$150 million towards the

Townsville Eastern Access Rail Corridor that local business has been calling for since 2006, he was probed repeatedly on refugees.

A little reframing was needed but he stood by his immigration minister. Mr Dutton brought up migrant literacy to explain why Australia needed to take its resettlement responsibilities seriously, he said. Mr Dutton was "right to draw attention" to the significant financial investment Australia makes in resettling refugees, he said.

"As Peter was saying earlier today, many of them come to Australia from shattered areas of the world... Many of them are illiterate in their own language. Many haven't completed high school. That is no fault of theirs."

Mr Turnbull was careful not to allow his local members, Ewen Jones, known for supporting the refugee program, and George Christensen, opposed to taking any Syrian refugees in his electorate, appear in front of a television camera.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten accused Mr Turnbull of feeding the lines to Mr Dutton, and said they were sentiments that would make Pauline Hanson proud.

The Liberals painted Labor as divided, talking up the number of candidates who have expressed concerns about the treatment of asylum seekers in detention.