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Green time bomb ticking under Abbott's agenda

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Immigration Minister Scott Morrison was quick to laud his Senate success. **Photo: Alex Ellinghausen**

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It was fitting the government's so-called "year of achievement" ended with a Senate success on border protection.

After a fortnight of legislative failure and frustration for the government, the red room finally delivered in the wee hours of Friday morning when it voted by 34 to 32 to reintroduce temporary protection visas in return for releasing kids from domestic detention.

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison held a press conference on Friday to laud his achievement. Tony Abbott, who, in case you missed it, had promised to stop the boats, declared the introduction of TPVs meant the last key piece of the Coalition's boat policy was in place, joining turn-backs and offshore processing.

The Coalition has not just taken the sugar off the table for the people-smugglers, it has taken the table outside, broken it up and used it as firewood.

Ironically, this could present problems of its own.

In terms of stated intention, combating people-smuggling has been by far and away the government's single greatest policy success since being elected. Its challenge is how to keep it in the public consciousness for the next two years until the next election.

This is not just the whisky talking. Cold, hard data prepared by political pollster John Scales and his team at JWS Research shows this. It also shows where the government is failing and why.

Government in deep trouble

The government remains in deep trouble over health, education and the economy, while the environment awaits like a time bomb.

The data is in JWS's quarterly research, *True Issues*, which is published exclusively in *AFR Weekend* and probes much deeper than standard issue polling.

Each three months, JWS samples 1004 voters. It asks them to nominate from a list of 11 policy areas the five

they consider the most important and then rate the government's performance in each. It then breaks each policy area down into
sub-categories.

If, for example, a person lists health as a policy area of importance, they are then presented with 15 sub-categories of health and asked to nominate their top three.

This is the type of polling that political parties conduct to best target areas of voter concern.

The November *True Issues* is the fifth in the series which began in June 2013, in the dying days of the Labor government.

Back then, immigration and border protection was a top-order issue. Now, thanks to the boats stopping, it is rated eight out of 11 as an area of importance.

At the same time, the percentage of voters who believe the government has done a good or very good job has climbed steadily from 12 per cent under Labor to 33 per cent now. That is the steepest rise in approval and second-highest rating out of all 11 categories, trailing only the 36 per cent good or very good rating for defence and security.

While wanting to find a way to keep boats at the forefront of voters' minds for the next two years, the government would be foolish to believe stopping the boats alone will get it across the line.

John Howard turned boats into a vote-winner in 2001, but it was a wedge issue. He never relied on it, because a government cannot win by focusing just on divisive issues.

Healthcare tops list

Howard put most emphasis on what mattered the most – the economy, health and education – and this is where the Abbott government is seriously wanting.

The past four *True Issues* surveys have found the importance voters place on these three areas is inversely proportional to how well they rate the government's performance in each area, and the government has failed to bridge the gaps.

Hospitals and healthcare is the number-one area of importance, with 84 per cent nominating it, yet just 16 per cent believe the government is doing a good job.

The sub-categories of most concern in health are the availability of hospital beds (40 per cent), followed by funding (37 per cent) and the cost of medicines (25 per cent). These are the same areas that were targeted by the federal budget. By the way, just 4 per cent care about Ebola.

The policy issue of second-greatest concern is education and training, with 66 per cent nominating it as important and 15 per cent believing the government is doing a good or very good job.

Within this policy, the top two areas of concern are the cost of education (43 per cent) and higher education funding (41 per cent) – again, areas directly related to the federal budget, especially this week's failed bid to slash university funding and deregulate fees.

Economy and finances rates as the third-highest area of importance, with 62 per cent rating it as important and 22 per cent giving the government the tick for its handling.

But within this policy, 61 per cent rate the cost of living as their greatest concern. That is the single highest number for any sub-category in any policy area. Wages and employment are second, on 30 per cent, followed by economic strength, petrol prices and housing affordability.

Just 15 per cent list returning the budget to surplus as important and 7 per cent support increasing the GST.

Environment a 'looming challenge'

All this underpins the theory that the budget has done little more than scare people in key policy areas and has been poorly sold.

These are real and present challenges that the government has failed to combat, but the "looming policy challenge", as Scales describes it, is the environment.

Essentially, the abolition of the carbon tax, one of the government's stated achievements this year, has been perceived as an economic, not an environmental, issue. Climate change and renewable energy remain signature concerns of voters.

The Abbott government's Direct Action policy has failed to feed the bulldog, while the attack on the Renewable

Energy Target has rattled its cage.

In the survey, 44 per cent rated the environment as important, making it a top-five issue, and 16 per cent judged the government as doing a good job. But 20 per cent rated it as poor and 29 per cent as very poor.

The top issues within the policy were climate change (44 per cent), renewable energy (35 per cent) and reducing carbon emissions (24 per cent).

Labor's decision not to abandon its policy principles on climate change do not look so dumb. Little wonder Julie Bishop felt the need to attend next week's climate change summit in Peru when the government wanted to send only officials.

Phillip Coorey is The Australian Financial Review's chief political correspondent.

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