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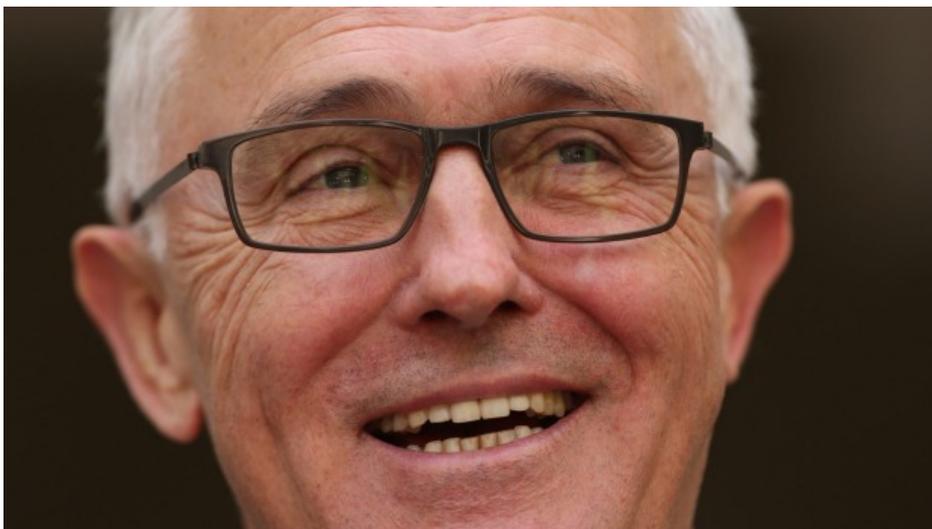
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OPINION | Nov 25 2016 at 4:15 PM | Updated Nov 25 2016 at 4:17 PM

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Malcolm Turnbull has reversed his decline in voters' eyes



The Prime Minister might be right to look cheered. Andrew Meares



by Phillip Coorey

It was precisely one year ago that the worm began to turn for the Turnbull government. And not in a good way.

It had been just over two months since Malcolm Turnbull deposed Tony Abbott for the leadership and externally, the government was cruising in the major published opinion polls.

The Fairfax/Ipsos poll around the time had the Coalition flogging Labor by 53 per cent to 47 per cent on a two-party-preferred basis. Before Abbott was opposed, Labor was leading 53-47.

Under Turnbull, the Coalition held a 15-percentage point lead on the primary vote, Turnbull's approval ratings were stratospheric and Bill Shorten's popularity was on par with that of cold sores. Newspoll was similar.

Beneath, however, all was not well.

Political pollster John Scales, whose company JWS Research samples the mood of the nation every quarter in its True Issues survey, detected in its November 2015 survey an underlying fragility in the government's poll numbers.

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That fragility was to later manifest itself into falling poll numbers for Turnbull and his government.

The True Issues survey samples more than 1000 voters every four months to gauge the policy issues about which they are most concerned and how they rate the government's handling of each.

The same 11 issues always tested are hospitals and healthcare, the economy, education, immigration and border security, community and social issues, infrastructure, quality of government, environment, defence and security, regional and rural Australia, and business and mining.

The November 2015 survey showed voters had marked down the government's performance in every one of these issues since the August 2015 survey, taken just before Abbott was replaced. Also, fears about border security and immigration were on the rise.

Scales concluded that cost of living concerns, driven by the government openly canvassing an increased GST, were acting like a sea-anchor in terms of stoking voter anxiety and pessimism.

"While the published polls show the new Prime Minister has greater support among voters in his role than his predecessor, and has turned around support for his party in the polls, this has yet to translate into improved performance scores on the issues that matter the most to Australians," he said.

The survey also measures confidence in the three-tiers of government, business and other relevant indicators such as economic direction.

It found those who thought the national economy was headed in the right direction had fallen from 24 to 18 per cent since the previous August survey.

This pessimism was driven by a decline in manufacturing and mining, and uncertainty about what would replace them.

"They don't know where the new jobs are coming from," Scales said.

It was an early warning to the government that all the talk of the new economy and agility was not resonating. As the election campaign in July, was to show, it was scaring many.

The worm may be turning

Ten days ago, JWS was in the field for the latest True Issues survey.

Again, it shows the worm may be turning, but this time in a good way for the government.

In a complete reversal of those findings a year ago, which proved such a harbinger, the government's performance in all 11 issues of concern has risen, and fears over border security and immigration has declined.

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Public confidence in the economy has rebounded from a record low in August when the post-election True Issues showed a significant slump across the board driven by the nail-biting election result and fears of another nuthouse Senate.

Now that the Senate has not proved to be the nightmare many thought, and the government is relatively stable given what could have been, things are bouncing back.

As he did a year ago, Scales warned against getting carried away, saying it was "not cheering in the streets sort of stuff".

But clearly, the slow decline in the underlying indicators which he first detected a year ago has begun to reverse and that "is a good situation for them going into Christmas".

Still, there are pitfalls ahead.

When Abbott and his government fell off a cliff in mid-2014, the May budget was the key culprit. But at the time, Scales was also among the first to warn that Abbott's obsession with niche issues – [section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act](#) and [the ABC](#) – was annoying the hell out of voters who wanted the government focused on their concerns, not those of Andrew Bolt and the rest of the Liberal latte set.

The latest True Issues survey shows that out of the 11 issues of concern tested, Quality of Government was equal eighth with 39 per cent listing it as a concern. Of these 39 per cent, just 8 per cent list 18C as a sub-issue of concern.

By comparison, 81 per cent cited health care, which is the top issue of concern. The top health sub-issue is Medicare and bulk-billing, cited by 37 per cent of those who nominated health.

That means of the 1225 people sampled, 367 mentioned Medicare and 38 mentioned 18C.

Under pressure from the Right, Turnbull has committed to do something about 18C by agreeing to an inquiry which will report in the new year. It is important he not allow it to consume the government to the detriment of other issues.

Next week, the last sitting week of the year, holds the potential for another significant policy victory – the passage of the Australian Building and Construction Commission legislation. All that stands in its way is [Nick Xenophon's concerns that his home state of SA is about to be dudded over water](#).

If it gets up, it will join this week's passage of the registered organisations legislation and the superannuation changes and the noticeable decision to start muscling up to Labor leader Bill Shorten.

Small victories do not translate into immediate votes but they build stability and morale. Moreover, the government still needs an agenda post-Christmas, as people are still unsure of what it actually wants to do.

Ultimately, recovery in politics is an incremental process.

But for the Coalition, the signs are encouraging.

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

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