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Sep 2 2016 at 11:45 PM | Updated Sep 2 2016 at 11:45 PM

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Voters lose faith as government squabbles



PM Malcolm Turnbull has warned his colleagues not to get distracted by niche issues and focus on the "bread and butter issues" affecting ordinary people. Alex Ellinghausen

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by Phillip Coorey

Malcolm Turnbull's warning that the Coalition cannot afford to be distracted by niche issues has been backed by a new survey that shows health, education and the economy remain the foremost concerns of voters but their rating of the government's handling of these, plus other key concerns including terrorism and security, is falling.

The latest quarterly True Issues survey also detects a growing disconnect between voters and the Parliament with people increasingly feeling that they can no longer rely on politicians to look after their economic wellbeing.

The True Issues survey is conducted by JWS Research. It gauges which issues voters want the government focused on and how they they rate the government's performance on each.

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The latest survey, taken late last month before the start of Parliament, finds hospitals and health remain the highest priorities for voters at 79 per cent, followed by education and the economy at 61 per cent apiece. Leaping to fourth at 49 per cent is defence, security and terrorism.

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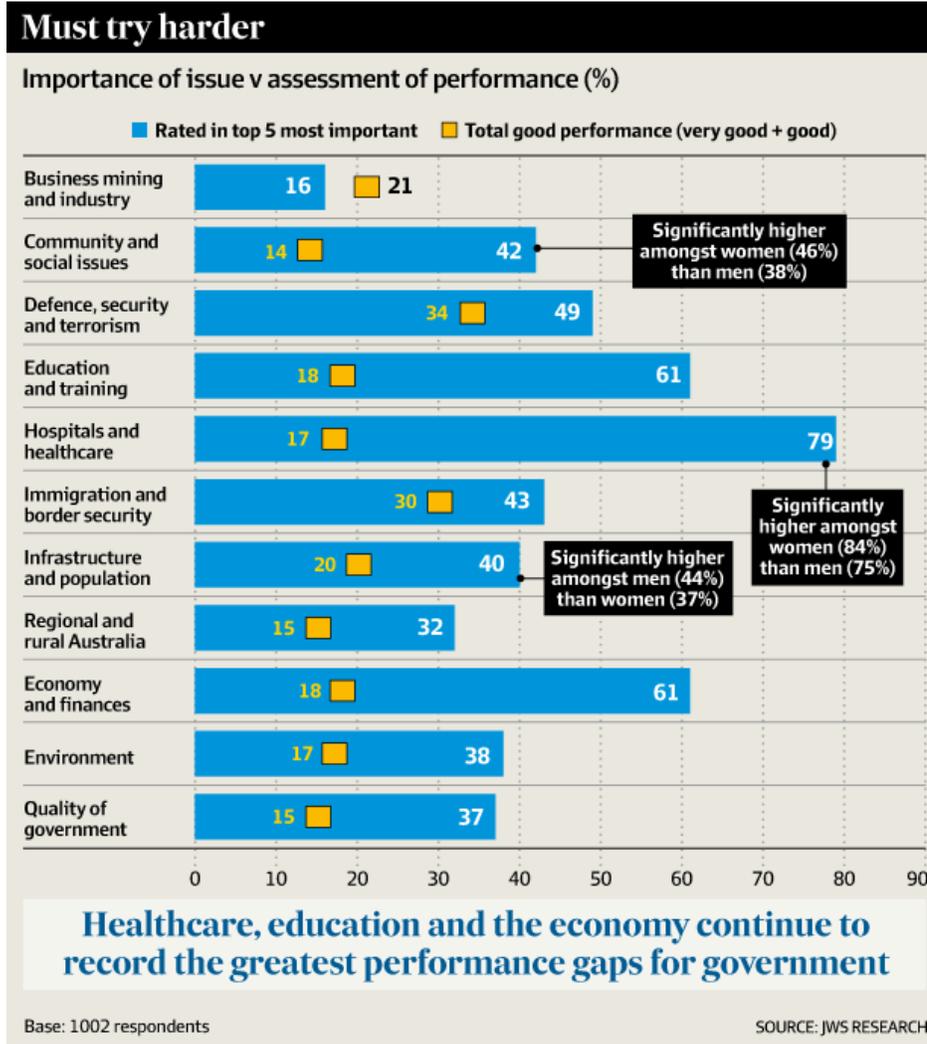
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Malcolm Turnbull's warning that the Coalition cannot afford to be distracted by niche issues has been backed by a new survey.

All these top areas of concern record big gaps between the percentage of voters who regard them as priorities and the government's performance rating for each.

It finds 79 per cent rate healthcare as a priority yet only 17 per cent rate the government as doing a good job.

Education and the economy are each rated by 61 per cent as priority areas for government but the performance rating for each is 18 per cent while on defence, security and terrorism, 34 per cent say the government is doing a good job, a sharp fall from the 41 per cent from the last survey in May.

Terror threat hits confidence

JWS pollster John Scales said heightened fears of domestic terror attacks, given what is happening abroad, were driving these numbers. So much so, that the general threat

of terror is deflating confidence in the government's handling of other issues. The survey shows voters marking down the government's performance in almost every policy issue of concern.

"It erodes confidence in the future," said Mr Scales.

Last week, Mr Turnbull used a party speech to warn his colleagues not to be distracted by niche issues such as Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act and same-sex marriage.

"This term must be about the bread and butter issues that occupy people's thoughts when they get up in the morning and when they lay down at night: their jobs, their health and education, whether they can pay their bills, their opportunities to get ahead, their security," he said.

Yet, the backbench largely ignored him with Coalition senators launching a revolt over 18C.

Personal, national disconnect

Mr Scales said the poll showed signs of voters giving up, underscored by how people view their own economic situation and the economy more generally.

The survey finds confidence in the direction of the national economy has fallen since the federal election while people's confidence in their own situation remains relatively upbeat.

"There is a disconnect between the personal situation and the national economy. They can no longer rely on government," said Mr Scales

He believes people are even more inclined to give up on the body politic due to its obsession with 18C, same-sex marriage and even banks.

"That's why they are making the choice to look after themselves."

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