

## Turnbull forced to delay reshuffle until March as Warren Truss leaves Nationals confused

Written by The Conversation

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When Malcolm Turnbull addressed his partyroom on Tuesday, he had a double message.

The election could reasonably be expected at the normal time, between August and October, Turnbull said. That's his current line. But, he added, that was not set in stone: a double dissolution was a "live option" that would have to be weighed up.

Translated, Turnbull is saying: I plan to go full term but I want to draw attention to this gun in my pocket, to encourage the Senate to pass some big measures, notably those dealing with union bad behaviour.

Turnbull's approach is understandable. But he has to be careful. He needs to keep up business confidence and doubt around election timing can harm that. The nuances get lost in the mad media cycle. On the other hand, business wants to curb the unions and perhaps in that cause will be tolerant of a bit more uncertainty.

Labor will not be influenced by the threat of a double dissolution, which would have to be held by mid-July. It is already operating as though the election is next month.

A double dissolution carries the risk of a more fragmented Senate crossbench than now because the quota is smaller, which is a disincentive to calling one.

But even with a smaller quota some, though not all, of the existing "micro" players would almost certainly be swept out. Whether any crossbenchers will take account of the threat to their own futures when considering their attitudes to bills is another matter.

Despite having a softer image than Tony Abbott, Turnbull will exploit to the full the damning report from the trade union royal commission that his predecessor set up. Turnbull gets the benefit of Abbott's very political act.

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The government on Tuesday reintroduced legislation to resurrect the watchdog Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). On current crossbench attitudes, its prospects – after being rejected once – are not good. The government will soon bring back tough legislation on registered organisations.

Turnbull told his MPs that the commission report was “a watershed moment”, showing a culture of corruption and malfeasance across sections of the union movement.

Bill Shorten still looks weak on the issue of industrial wrongdoing and Labor is conflicted; the bottom line is the unions have too much influence in and over the ALP and Shorten has shown little inclination to do anything about it.

At a tactical level, the government has been cack-handed in some of its play around the commission report. It said it would show the secret part of the report to crossbenchers whose support it is seeking for the ABCC legislation, but that access wouldn't be accorded to Labor and the Greens.

It then changed its mind, offering them access but on such absurdly restrictive conditions that they could respectably decline. The offer was for just one person in each of Labor and the Greens to view the material. No notes could be taken and “the details and nature of the material ... may not be disclosed to third parties”.

Whether Turnbull ends up able to wield any leverage over the Senate on his industrial relations legislation remains to be seen. He certainly doesn't appear to have the slightest influence when it comes to clearing the way for his ministerial reshuffle, which is waiting on Nationals leader Warren Truss clarifying his future.

Unfortunately Truss, now almost universally expected to quit the leadership, muddied the waters when he spoke to the Nationals partyroom on Monday.

He flagged an announcement at the end of this sitting. Colleagues took that to mean when the parliamentary fortnight wraps up next week. But he apparently meant the end of this session,

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which finishes mid-March. Truss is said to want to be present through much of the budget's expenditure review process. If he sticks to this timetable it is very awkward for Turnbull. It delays the reshuffle, and has Turnbull dancing to Truss' (slow) tune.

The reshuffle – in the wake of Jamie Briggs quitting the ministry because of inappropriate behaviour and Mal Brough standing aside – is expected to be limited but not minimal. Turnbull knows he needs to get on with it as soon as possible, but cannot. Having one set of changes before Truss' announcement and another one after would be a farce. Never a patient man, Turnbull's degree of frustration can only be guessed at.

Meanwhile Turnbull's problems on the tax front are increasing, as nervousness surfaces in the Nationals about the possibility of a higher GST. The Nationals hold some of the poorest electorates and say they would have a lot of trouble explaining a tax change which included a great deal of "churn" in compensation for limited benefit.

No wonder Turnbull was again cautious in Tuesday's partyroom when talking about tax. On the GST issue, he is staying agile.

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