

Morrison's embarrassment over budget timing was more his fault than Turnbull's

Written by The Conversation USA

Malcolm Turnbull admits he did not make a call on Sunday night to tell Scott Morrison he was bringing the budget forward, but that draws attention to the obvious point – Morrison had abundant warning.

Morrison's embarrassment over declaring the budget would be delivered on May 10 about an hour before Turnbull announced it would be May 3 has been seized upon as the latest evidence of what are poor relations between the two.

It's actually evidence of Morrison's inept and too clever-by-half style. Morrison was fully aware the budget was highly likely to be earlier. Quite apart from the fact it had been in the media for weeks, the government's inner sanctum had discussed the tactic of recalling parliament prior to a possible double dissolution, which would require a May 3 budget.

Despite this, during his regular Monday morning date with shock jock Ray Hadley, Morrison insisted the budget was on May 10.

Did he not see the danger when Hadley ribbed him with a "niggling suspicion" the budget would be earlier? Apparently not. "Well, we are preparing for May 10, Ray. I can't be clearer," and later, among other repeats of the date, "the budget is on May 10".

Morrison played a game, and ended up looking out of the loop or worse, rather than taking insurance by giving himself adequate wiggle room.

Under questioning on Wednesday, Turnbull spelled out the sequence of events. "The treasurer was well aware, as were the members of our leadership group, that we were considering and were likely, very likely in fact, to ask the governor-general to call the parliament back on 18 April and if we did that obviously the budget would have to come back a week early," he told Nine.

The decision on the timing of going to Government House – a matter for Turnbull – was taken on Sunday, he said.

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He had not called Morrison on Sunday night. "It was a very small circle" involved at that stage, he said, mentioning in particular Attorney-General George Brandis, who had prepared the material for the governor-general. Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, with carriage of the industrial bills the Senate is being recalled to discuss, was also involved.

In retrospect, it would have been better for Turnbull to have called Morrison. But perhaps he did not anticipate that his treasurer would be so unwise as to lock himself into a date that he knew was likely to be wrong. Perhaps he assumed Morrison would exercise prudent caution in his chat with Hadley.

But then one of Morrison's political faults is that he is nearly always too definite.

For months he conjured up an impending crisis over bracket creep – and then found there wasn't the money to meet the problem he had dramatised.

He trailed his coat on a tax mix switch, only to discover he was way out in front of Turnbull.

His department was considered inadequate to manage the tax issue, with the result that the head of the prime minister's department, Martin Parkinson, was made the top guru.

Last week he effectively ruled out income tax cuts in the budget, when Turnbull would have preferred the option to be left at least at the edge of the table, given it will be hard to have a company tax cut in the budget without at least the promise of a personal income tax cut later on.

He has repeatedly said the government won't give the states any help to meet their health and education funding crisis – now it seems that it will.

Morrison had been expected to be a lot better performer than predecessor Joe Hockey but has failed to live up to these hopes. He is too political, he lacks nuance. He plays his own media game – colleagues are sometimes uncertain what he has been doing. He needs a better office,

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which is criticised within the government.

The difficulties with Morrison and the tension between the prime minister and treasurer are real, and very bad in the run up to the budget, when the government can't afford any distractions or perception of differences. It is easy to spot the problem, harder to identify a solution. A treasurer must be given room to move, but needs to be – yes, that word again – more agile than Morrison has shown himself.

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