

Bill Shorten should be praying those pesky crossbenchers give in to Malcolm Turnbull and pass the government's industrial legislation.

Unless they do – and so far there doesn't seem much prospect – the bad behaviour of some unions, notably the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), will be right in the centre of a double-dissolution campaign.

That can't be good for Shorten, who has been weak on the issue. While he insists Labor has zero tolerance for instances of union thuggery and corruption, he tends to minimise the problem.

The impression remains that he is too much under the influence of the unions generally and in particular is unwilling to robustly distance himself and his party from the CFMEU, which donates large amounts to the ALP and helped Shorten's numbers on difficult issues at last year's ALP national conference.

There is not just a matter of perception, but one of substance. Put bluntly, it is disturbing that the CFMEU would be well placed to influence a Shorten government.

Shorten should have confronted the excessive power unions have in the ALP's structure. He should have taken on the CFMEU. He should not have as his workplace relations spokesman Brendan O'Connor, brother of CFMEU national secretary Michael O'Connor.

Shorten belatedly put forward the opposition's own proposals but Labor would be better placed if it had allowed passage of the government's legislation toughening union governance. This is one of the bills that will be before the recalled Senate.

As for the legislation to restore the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) – also to be considered in the special sitting – the ALP argues it restricts people's rights and breaches the principle of equality before the law by separating out one sector for special

treatment.

But Shorten is unlikely to win the debate in the public arena, given what came out of the royal commission into trade unions and the large number of CFMEU officials and delegates now before the courts for industrial breaches.

Polling done by Essential published this week found 35% supported reestablishing the ABCC, with 17% opposed, 27% neither supporting nor opposing, and 22% “don't knows”. In October 2013, 29% supported bringing the ABCC back; 22% opposed.

If the crossbenchers passed the bills in coming weeks, Turnbull would have a victory but there would not be a double dissolution, and industrial relations would not be so sharply profiled when the election campaign came. Labor would have more opportunity to find the government's weaknesses, and to elevate its own issues, especially health and education.

Of course even in a double dissolution triggered by the industrial relations legislation, economic management and tax will be core issues. Turnbull, presumably assuming a double dissolution, has merged the tax package into the budget, now on May 3. This gives what otherwise could be an anorexic budget a centrepiece, and helps offset the fact that the tax reform is less ambitious than once hoped.

Also, it fits the flagged company tax cut into a broader economic context. A poll done for Sky News underlined what every Coalition backbencher would know – a company tax cut is not something ordinary voters are hanging out for.

Asked to choose from a list of what the government's highest priority should be, 46% said fixing the budget and returning to surplus, 27% nominated spending more on education, 25% said personal income tax cuts and only 3% opted for company tax cuts.

This is the Coalition's third budget. The first deeply soured people's views of the Abbott government and its treasurer, Joe Hockey, and also heavily circumscribed the framing of the following one. As he struggles with this last budget of the term, the pre-election one, Treasurer

Scott Morrison is working against the background of a money tree with few leaves and a relationship with Turnbull that has become poor.

His colleagues and his boss will be closely watching how well he does in selling the budget's tax and other measures. There won't want to be stuff ups.

Politics is a competitive game, and Morrison has a potential rival sitting further along the frontbench. Former Western Australian treasurer Christian Porter gave up state politics to pack his bags for Canberra in 2013. Porter was on track to be premier; his eyes look beyond his present social services ministry.

As a member of cabinet's expenditure review committee, Porter is, in the words of one source, "active without overdoing it", and some Liberals are already speculating he would be a good treasurer for a re-elected Turnbull government.

Morrison is not deputy Liberal leader, a post carrying the right to choose one's portfolio. His future, if the government is returned, would be totally in the hands of Turnbull, who has already shown a ruthless streak in dealing with ministers – ask Ian Macfarlane, who was dropped.

Morrison earned the treasury job because at the time he was seen as a good performer. Potentially, he has to earn that job all over again.

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