

Malcolm Turnbull says bluntly that he expects the coming special Senate sitting to reject the industrial legislation. Labor's Penny Wong indicates the opposition won't be playing silly buggers by trying to delay the bills.

As parliamentarians prepare to return to Canberra next week, both sides just want to get to the double dissolution now regarded as virtually certain.

Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, with carriage of the legislation, has been catapulted centre stage just months after she was one of the three women promoted to cabinet when Turnbull became leader.

Experienced in industrial law from her solicitor days, Cash was in the small group at the Lodge the night Turnbull finalised his strategy to have parliament recalled, with the threat of a double dissolution if the Senate refused to pass the industrial relations bills.

One government source says Cash has "surprised on the upside" in her performance in the Turnbull ranks.

The bills at the centre of the double-dissolution play resurrect the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) and toughen trade union governance.

But recently added to the agenda for the special parliamentary session – though not relevant to the double dissolution – is the government's move to scrap the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal, following a new pay decision that small operators say would send many of them out of business.

This is also in Cash's bailiwick. The government initially intended to put the ruling on hold until early next year, while promising that if re-elected it would abolish the tribunal. But then, sensing it could get the Senate numbers, it decided to push ahead at once with abolition. This adds to its anti union, pro small business election narrative.

While it is fairly confident it has the needed support, the government is also adopting a belt-and-braces approach by putting forward the delay option too.

It's a different story with the industrial relations bills. Although the Registered Organisations legislation is already a double-dissolution trigger, it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility that the required six crossbenchers could be persuaded to support it with some compromises. But it is nearly impossible to see the coming weeks bringing a deal on the ABCC.

Anyway, the government has no incentive. The momentum is now so strong for a July 2 double dissolution that it would be quite awkward if the industrial legislation were passed, forcing Turnbull to back off and re-gear for a later normal election. In these circumstances extra time might harm rather than help him.

Yet the benefits of a double dissolution for Turnbull in terms of the Senate are debatable. ABC election analyst Antony Green calculates that, even with the recently reformed voting system, there is a strong prospect a re-elected Turnbull government would face [another potentially difficult upper house](#).

"There are serious questions whether a double dissolution would be of any benefit to the government's Senate position," Green wrote. "A double dissolution is unlikely to deliver the Coalition more Senate seats than it currently holds. The government would still need the support of up to half a dozen crossbench senators to pass legislation."

But the government takes the view that a new Senate, regardless of its crossbench component, would present a fresh start. It sees the present upper house as the "Abbott" Senate, afflicted by the former prime minister's broken promises and fractured relationships. Turnbull could argue to a new Senate that his re-elected government had a mandate, and launch a charm offensive.

Cash is in the fortunate position that whatever happens to the industrial relations legislation, she won't look bad.

If, contrary to all indications, the crossbench senators caved, it would be a victory for which she

as negotiator would be able to claim some credit. If, as expected, they don't, the government moves on to the double dissolution considered all along to be Turnbull's preferred position.

Turnbull on Wednesday anticipated the industrial relations bills' defeat: "every indication we have is that they will be rejected". The Senate had voted against the ABCC once, and the Registered Organisations bill three times, he said. "So if the past is any guide to future performance then you would expect it wouldn't be passed."

Wong, Labor's Senate leader, on Thursday confirmed Labor will not try to prevent the bills being considered, as some had speculated. "We will deal with these bills. We won't be delaying," she said. "If Malcolm Turnbull wants a double-dissolution election, we're ready for an election."

Turnbull's tactic of the special sitting is not risk-free for him. The Coalition is limiting the dangers presented by multiple Question Times by having the lower house sit only two days next week and not at all the following one.

But Labor already has a boxful of ammunition for the lower house Question Times on Monday and Tuesday. The government is on the back foot in resisting a royal commission into the banks' bad behaviour. More serious is this week's assessment from Moody's credit rating agency, ominously highlighting the debt issue – "a credit negative for Australia" – and contesting Treasurer Scott Morrison's repeated insistence there is not a revenue problem.

Meanwhile at week's end the hyperactive Cash was in Townsville, to deal with another issue on her crowded plate – the fallout for workers of the collapse of Clive Palmer's Queensland Nickel.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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