

Turnbull looks like a sprinter but is in a marathon

Written by The Conversation USA

When the politicians arrived in Canberra for their special parliamentary session, it was obvious everyone wanted to do what was necessary for a July 2 election, and do it quickly.

Instead of taking weeks to consider the industrial legislation, the Senate by dinner time Monday had given the government its second double dissolution trigger, by rejecting the resurrection of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

Then the legislation to scrap the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal, which the government only introduced on Monday morning, passed both houses in the day.

Government and opposition have been priming for weeks for the July 2 double dissolution. The pivotal crossbenchers, who held the election in their hands, had variously decided a DD was in their interests or resigned themselves to the political oblivion it will bring.

With the government's support uncomfortably low and in danger of further erosion without a circuit breaker, Malcolm Turnbull has every interest in getting to the polls ASAP. After the build up, it would have been awkward if the Senate had capitulated and the election had had to be rescheduled some months on.

Labor, with the numbers to defeat the ABCC bill, had the motive not to delay. It didn't want many days of well aired debate about union bad behaviour.

As it was Labor embarrassed itself on Monday, thanks to the extraordinary attack by its deputy Senate leader Stephen Conroy on Governor-General Peter Cosgrove.

Conroy's comparison of Cosgrove's proroguing the parliament with John Kerr's sacking of Gough Whitlam was absurd as well as offensive. Cosgrove acted, as he properly should have, on the advice of his prime minister, and Turnbull's advice to him was perfectly in order under the constitution. Kerr defied and deceived his prime minister.

We will remember 2016 as the endless election campaign.

We've been in a faux campaign for nearly a month - ever since Turnbull gave the Senate the ultimatum to pass the industrial bills or face the people.

A double dissolution was thought from the start to be Turnbull's preference. Some crossbenchers say the government wasn't serious about negotiating on the ABCC legislation, although certain demands were out of the ballpark even if the government had been receptive.

While we are now sure of the election's date and nature, we're still a while from its formal calling. That will follow budget week - probably on the weekend of May 7-8.

Meanwhile the government is going hell for leather not only to get the budget finalised but to deal with outstanding items including whatever it intends to say about the submarine contract, so vital to South Australian seats.

Budgets are always important but seldom quite as crucial as the one that Treasurer Scott Morrison will deliver on May 3.

It would sour the start of the formal campaign if it were off key, got a thumbs down from the media, and the public reacted negatively.

This week's Newspoll indicated voters want an economically cautious budget. Asked what the priority of the next government should be, 39% said reduce spending to pay down debt, 26% said reduce spending to cut taxes, while 23% said increase spending on government programs.

But what people say when talking in a poll and how they react to specific measures can be quite different.

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The government needs its budget to be seen as both responsible and robust. It has to satisfy the fiscal imperatives – and the rating agency Moody's delivered a sharp warning about the dangers of debt last week. It should not be a do-nothing budget. Among other areas, eyes will be on tax, where initial sweeping ambitions have shrunk muchly.

With polling showing Turnbull has disappointed the hopes and expectations of many voters, the Prime Minister and his team can't afford to do so again on May 3. No pressure, Scott Morrison, but you are headed into the test of your political life.

Despite the polls, most observers see Turnbull as favourite to win the election. But Shorten enters the coming weeks very well placed – an extraordinary turnaround given his earlier position.

Labor has been strategic and bold. It has not just released a body of policy but been willing to take risks with it. Ultimate judgements about those risks - especially whether it has gone too far on negative gearing - must wait.

But most significantly, Labor has been able to nail what has emerged as Turnbull's vulnerability – his failure so far to articulate clearly what he stands for, to set out a course and hold to it. The opposition has developed a narrative about Turnbull's lack of narrative.

The length and the unusual nature of this campaign, with its stages – pre-budget, then from budget to formal announcement, followed by the campaign proper – will require extreme stamina and steadiness from both Turnbull and Shorten. It will be hard to find enough content to fill all those weeks. Without sufficient content, there is the danger, especially for Turnbull, of wandering into quicksand.

It is not just the leaders' standing as they go into a campaign that's important. How the campaign evolves week by week can be decisive. Given Turnbull's tendency to a discursive style, one would think a short sharp sprint might be safest. Instead he has to run a marathon.

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