

It is a shocking truth that, for the most part, the politicians are leaving their humanity at home as they debate the future of the men on Manus Island.

They give little sense that they are talking about people who – whatever their particular motives in getting on boats – have been in a hellhole for years.

By contrast, there is an acute sense of the politicians, at least behind the scenes, weighing potential political advantage or danger as this new situation plays out unpredictably.

The government believes that while Papua New Guinea's call for Australia to remove the asylum seekers – following its Supreme Court ruling that their detention is unconstitutional – creates a problem, having border protection in the news helps the Coalition.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton hasn't produced a solution, despite saying "we've been planning for this since late last year". But he was instantly out of the blocks to capitalise on a handful of Labor parliamentarians saying the men should be brought to Australia.

Malcolm Turnbull repeated multiple times that the Manus men wouldn't be coming here and declared "we cannot be misty-eyed" on border protection.

The opposition fears the politics – it is desperate to stick close to the government in supporting offshore processing. Bill Shorten proclaims Labor and the Liberals are on a "unity ticket" to defeat people smugglers. But Shorten, with mixed views in his party, also stresses Labor opposes "indefinite detention" and optimistically claims it would be more successful getting agreement to resettle people in third countries.

Late Thursday Turnbull spoke with PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, reiterating Australia would not be accepting the asylum seekers. They agreed officials would work together; Australian officials will be in PNG next week.

Grattan on Friday: The Manus issue intrudes on carefully crafted pre-election scripts

Written by The Conversation USA

Government sources expect an arm-wrestle between the two governments in a search for a way to keep the Manus centre functioning, with PNG using its leverage to extract money from Australia.

The stakes are high, with implications for the wider bilateral relationship.

For Australia, having to relocate the men would be very difficult. Dutton has ruled out Christmas Island. While Nauru has space, sending them into that community would invite trouble in an already trauma-ridden place. Other destinations are not in sight.

Whenever asylum issues erupt before an election, it's ugly. This time it might remind the world Australia has an effective border policy, but it also exposes a harsh, defensive face.

Dutton's claimed knowledge notwithstanding, the Manus story burst unexpectedly into the unofficial campaign. It highlights how suddenly new issues erupt in an election run up, especially when it is very long.

Turnbull is set to call the election in a week's time – next Friday or at the weekend – giving eight weeks to polling day. Not only will this be an endurance test for Turnbull and Shorten, neither of whom have previously led in a campaign, but it will try the patience of many voters, who just want to get this contest behind them.

In the latest Essential poll, 40% approved of Turnbull calling the July 2 double-dissolution election, and 42% thought the Coalition the most likely to win. Only 28% opposed the early election, the same proportion as predicted a Labor victory.

The low expectation of Labor prevailing contrasts with the polls, which have been neck and neck. Essential has Labor leading 52-48%. But an analysis by Monash University's Nick Economou of marginal seats state by state tells a different story, indicating what [an uphill battle Labor faces](#)

Economou writes:

The swings against the Coalition occurring in the polls are in states with comparatively few seats or, in the case of Victoria, comparatively few marginal government seats. Queensland and NSW are the key battlegrounds and, so far, the polls are indicating that the Coalition vote is holding up.

While Manus became the dramatic political story of the week, the campaigning was in full swing with major announcements from both sides.

The government awarded the A\$50 billion submarine deal to the French, with an all-Adelaide build it hopes will firewall the Liberal South Australian seats. Just don't expect an answer to the question of what premium the taxpayer will be hit for.

The submarines are bipartisan – in contrast to Labor's announced climate policy, which will be at the centre of the political divide.

The opposition has committed to an ambitious target for emissions reduction but been cautious in the design of its two proposed emissions trading schemes, one specifically for the electricity sector.

Labor sources concede the policy is a risk, less for what's actually in it but because it presses the rewind button to the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era, a gift for negative advertising.

This might make it more politically chancy than Labor's pledge to restrict negative gearing, which the government sees as a huge target. How the negative gearing initiative fares will depend substantially on whether Labor or the Coalition is more successful in defining the debate about winners and losers. The battleground on negative gearing is crowded: Turnbull this week was in hand-to-hand combat with the Grattan Institute over its analysis.

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On Friday the announcement flow continues, with Turnbull launching a “smart cities plan” pointing to a need “to rethink the way our cities are planned, built and managed” that requires a partnership between all levels of government.

All this is preliminary to the main event before the election starter gun is fired – Tuesday’s budget.

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