

Resembling a rough game of ice hockey, the 2016 campaign already has seen slips, slides and own goals. Neither side has scored a big break through.

Bill Shorten – who must win the campaign itself for victory in the election – has been undermined by trouble with candidates' stands on asylum seekers. On another front, Chris Brown from the Maritime Union, ALP candidate for Fremantle, was dumped after failing to disclose old convictions, prompting an angry reaction from the union.

Malcolm Turnbull has had to deal with claims the budget's superannuation reform is retrospective, echoes of the September leadership coup, and being named (without a suggestion of wrongdoing) in the Panama Papers.

Each side is defending its policy pitch – the growth boost from the government's company tax cut, and the economic benefit from Labor's plan to pump large scale funding into schools.

The Greens have been centre-stage for much of the first week. How great a threat are they to Labor seats? Will they get Liberal preferences? And if there were a minority Labor government, what would be its relationship with them?

Demonising the Greens is de rigueur for both sides in campaigns now the minor party has become a force.

Labor is under pressure from two directions, with Liberal claims it would be back in bed with the Greens in a flash, and with the Greens' encroachment on some of its seats.

Conjuring up the spectre of the Gillard days, the government warns of a Labor-Greens "coalition" or "alliance" and "Adam Bandt [expected to be re-elected in Melbourne] as the deputy treasurer of the country under a Labor/Greens government".

Shorten is emphatic there would be no deal of any sort with the Greens.

It's worth getting a few things clear here, as terms are being thrown around randomly to scare.

A "coalition" is what the Liberals and Nationals have – two parties in a government. An "alliance" is what Julia Gillard had with the Greens when she was in minority government – a formal deal under which both parties agree on certain things, which included, in that case, a role for the Greens in the formulation of the carbon policy.

A formal deal is a security blanket for a minority government, and a way for a small party to leverage its power. Greens leader Richard Di Natale is anxious to play the Greens in, if there happened to be a minority Labor government.

"What we should have is a sensible, responsible, mature negotiation ... if it is a close election and there is a possibility of a power-sharing arrangement. I want to make sure that Bill Shorten is going to commit to undertaking that negotiation rather than simply sending Australia back to the polls for a second election," Di Natale said, resorting to a bit of scare himself.

But if Labor were in minority government and needed Greens support, there would be no need for an alliance or "power-sharing". It would just have to avoid being defeated in a no-confidence vote in the House of Representatives. And think of it this way: would the Greens really want to bring down a Labor government, and install or risk the alternative?

This is Di Natale's first campaign as leader and he's relishing the attention the Greens are receiving. Unlike Labor, which is fearful of talk about past links, Di Natale happily recalls what his party got out of the Gillard alliance. The problems of those days were not from that, but from Labor's internal divisions, he says.

Negative campaigning is seen as very effective, and the government has struck pay dirt with the differences in Labor over the electorally potent issue of border security.

Labor sees the issue – on which Shorten firmly held the line this week – as an irritant at this stage but with the potential to become very serious if not contained.

Again, it's important to insert a reality check on Liberal claims that a Labor government would lose control of the borders. Shorten can be believed when he says he is committed to a tough policy. Having been through the consequences of going soft, a Labor government wouldn't want a repeat.

The area where it might make some compromise is the future of the people on Nauru and Manus Island. But a re-elected Turnbull government might do that too.

It is true many in Labor's left don't support the Shorten policy on turnbacks. But the left leadership is locked into it, following last year's ALP national conference decision. And if Labor were in power the left generally would not have the numbers or clout to change it.

How much of what's happened in the campaign so far has penetrated the consciousness of the public is a moot point. Reports from both government and opposition suggest people are bored, disengaged, and dreading being subjected to a further 49 days.

No matter. As one insider observed, this can be seen as a training week for the two leaders. They don't really need an audience yet.

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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