

Grattan on Friday: Is Malcolm Turnbull inoculated against Labor's Medicare scare?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

We've yet to find out just how much Labor's Medicare scare will frighten the public between now and July 2. But it has sent some seismic tremors through the Liberals, grabbed the attention of previously disengaged voters and dominated the campaign's penultimate week.

Labor's claim that Malcolm Turnbull would "privatise" Medicare, based on the government's plan to outsource the payments system, might have been over the top, but it was a spectacularly effective strike. The evidence? How quickly Turnbull dropped the outsourcing idea, even though it might have been perfectly sound and funds had been allocated to advance it.

While objectively the privatisation claim can be condemned as hyperbole, it is not seen that way by some voters. In the blur of political impressions, they think so much has been privatised by governments Medicare may be too.

Labor nevertheless moved back a little from its over-reach, with privatisation morphing into the government failing to protect Medicare, injecting more user-pays into it. Medicare would be eroded by a greater proportion of the cost of services coming out of your pocket.

That's a powerful message, because it can be tied back to what the Coalition has done or tried to do, and what it has in the pipeline. Think the 2014 budget, with its ill-fated co-payment that was later abandoned. Think the 2016 budget, with its extension of the freeze on the Medicare rebate.

Even before Bill Shorten's scare ramped up to this week's fever pitch, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RCGP) was running advertising, born out of the budget's extension of the freeze and badged as "an important message" from the college. In one TV ad, the GP asks a young woman "why didn't you come sooner?" To which she replies "because of the money".

The RCGP covers some 70-75% of GPs. People going to doctors' surgeries are likely find themselves staring at a poster in the waiting room with the label "DANGER"; it warns their family's health is being targeted and urges them to "tell your local candidates that you oppose the extended freeze".

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The government seeks to reassure the public by pointing to high bulk billing rates. Turnbull forcefully insists Medicare is safe. But everyone recalls Tony Abbott's 2013 pledge of no cuts to health. No-one believes politicians anymore. Except, perhaps, when they say something bad will happen.

Labor is delighted with the scare campaign; the Liberals admit it has been potent. The ALP will continue to plug the threat to Medicare through the final week, together with its positive policies on health, education, the NBN and the broad themes of equality and fairness.

The government needs not just to hose down the Medicare scare but to drag the debate back onto economic ground. Turnbull's Sunday's launch – like Shorten's, in Sydney's west – will give him an opportunity to do this.

So, importantly, will Labor's unveiling of its costings. That release is a serious danger point for the opposition. Remember that Labor's worst point in this campaign was when it admitted it would have bigger deficits than the government over the forward estimates.

As we move into countdown, there are differing assessments of the state of play. A swing seems on but the question is how big. Government sources say they are confident of being returned with a majority. Labor sources say it is close, that the opposition's in with a chance, but would need a good last week to get across the line. What a hung parliament would look like is anyone's guess.

A number of factors are complicating readouts. They include the decline of commercial TV with implications for the effect of advertising, the significance of social media, and the increasing numbers who are pre-polling. To state the obvious, for someone who voted this week, the campaign is over – any last-minute influences on them came in the past few days.

Polls show substantial support for minor and micro players. But will that translate into something new in the House of Representatives? Batman still seems a toss up between Labor and Greens. There is speculation the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT), a huge phenomenon in South Australia and set to do very well in the Senate, might clinch a lower house win or two. It's reported from the South Australian pre-polling that people are grabbing NXT how-to-vote cards.

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This week has given Shorten a fillip. For Turnbull, it has been something of a nightmare. Not only did the Medicare scare run riot but at the week's start he was ill.

On Tuesday night Abbott's former chief-of-staff Peta Credlin delivered a scathing assessment of Turnbull's performance. "He looks a bit patrician, that he's standing back – everybody else can campaign and I just expect you to vote for me", she said. "The arguments are great, but I think the effort from the individual has to lift."

If Turnbull does poorly on July 2, we'll have had a preview of a line of criticism the Abbott forces will run.

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

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