

There is much talk, after the close election and the substantial vote for the bit players, that the message voters are sending politicians is that they want them to work together for the national good. If this is so, one suspects they'll be waiting a while.

Bill Shorten said on Sunday he will try to find the common ground that exists to make the new parliament work – while Labor also sticks to its guns and backs in its policies. This on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand position could justify co-operation or conflict on individual issues. So it's giving no clear roadmap.

The parliament will have multiple players with varying degrees of power, and they will all claim “mandates”: the Coalition for the measures they took to the election, the opposition for the alternatives its voters supported.

The Greens, the Nick Xenophon Team, and Pauline Hanson can say they have “mandates” from their respective voters.

Put it all together and it's more likely a recipe for a degree of gridlock rather than a new co-operative way.

In a hard-headed political calculation Shorten will be weighing up the advantages and drawbacks of different stances.

If he is too aggressive, he risks coming under public and media criticism for being obstructive.

But if he doesn't take the fight strongly up to the government, he gives Malcolm Turnbull a break and potentially faces internal criticism. If Labor and Shorten's ratings slip, Anthony Albanese's ambitions will burn brighter.

As the Coalition's 76th seat and thus majority government were confirmed on Monday, Shorten continued to act as if the campaign hadn't stopped. At a news conference he was still fighting the plebiscite on same-sex marriage – he flagged an attempt to get a conscience vote in parliament first – and he called for an independent review of whether the government's proposed superannuation changes are retrospective.

The test of Shorten's willingness to co-operate will be how Labor behaves in the Senate, where the presence of a crossbench making plenty of demands on government will mean that, as in the last parliament, Labor can wield real power.

Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen on Monday indicated Labor would maintain its opposition to various so-called "zombie" savings measures that the government wasn't earlier able to legislate but has kept in its budget numbers. There is general agreement the government will only get part of its company tax cuts through – this will have the incidental advantage of saving it money though mostly beyond the forward estimates.

In short, on the balance of probabilities and despite some highfalutin talk, Turnbull is likely to receive a good deal more grief than co-operation from the Shorten opposition.

All that's for a little later. Most immediately is Turnbull's task of re-forming the government.

The Nationals meet on Tuesday, with tails up and total numbers increased from 21 to 22, after Monday's confirmation of their seat of Capricornia.

Although final Senate counting has to bed down the relativities, on present trends the Nationals say they would be entitled to one extra cabinet position and one extra in the outer ministry. This is following an established formula.

The election has left three frontbench vacancies – those of Wyatt Roy, Peter Hendy and (probably) senator Richard Colbeck, all Liberals.

Speculation has had it that Turnbull is inclined to promote a couple of younger conservative Liberals – Michael Sukkar and Zed Seselja – as one way of justifying keeping out the older conservatives, including Tony Abbott. But if the Nationals press for two extra ministers – well, the equation becomes awkward. To say nothing of what to do with the cabinet – with the options either to drop a Liberal or expand the size of an already large cabinet.

The Nationals won't be surprised if there is push-back from Turnbull. That would make for an interesting test of who blinks.

National leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce can point out that it is the Nationals' success that underpins the Coalition being in majority government.

The Nationals also keep on hand a 2006 quote from John Howard when changed relativities led to the them losing a frontbench position. "Politics ... is remorselessly governed by the laws of arithmetic," Howard said. "If at some time in the future the proportions between the two parties were to change in favour of the National Party, the Liberal Party would need to surrender a position."

The Nationals party meeting will discuss their wishlist. There has been chatter about their interest in the portfolios of communications and small business. Decisions about what portfolios to pursue will rest with Joyce and his most senior colleagues; what portfolios the Nationals finally get will be decided by haggling between Joyce and Turnbull, with Turnbull having the ultimate say.

The two leaders will finalise a Coalition agreement, which traditionally has been about numbers and positions but last time, after the prime ministerial switch, included a letter containing policy commitments to which Turnbull had agreed. The policy document became public from the Nationals' partyroom.

It is unclear whether Joyce will pursue having policy commitments put into a formal document. Whatever the content of the agreement, he says it won't be released.

Nationals' ministerial claims complicate Turnbull's reshuffle

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Nationals' ministerial numbers and portfolios will be obvious but if the agreement contains policy undertakings it should be made public.

People absolutely have the right to know what promises Turnbull has given the junior Coalition partner. And no doubt a few Nationals, sometimes scorned by the Liberals, might like bragging rights.

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