

Grattan on Friday: Shorten wants to play hardball but can he dodge the 'opportunist' tag?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

With the new parliament finally opening on Tuesday, Bill Shorten's tightrope tactics will soon be tested.

In the two months since the July 2 poll, Shorten has essentially continued his election campaign, out in the media most days as though the vote were still to come. He's given little quarter to the government but insisted, not very convincingly, that he wants to be constructive and co-operative.

This week, for instance, he proposed a bunch of budget savings, totalling A\$8 billion over the forward estimates, from Labor's program. Shorten advanced his package in the name of budget repair.

There was no realistic prospect the government would accept them. Why would anyone think the Coalition would do a post-election turnaround on curbing negative gearing, when one of its campaign pitches was attacking Labor's plan? This was faux constructiveness.

At the same time, the signals from Labor are that it is likely to pass the government's omnibus bill for \$6.5 billion in savings. These are Coalition savings that Labor "banked" in its pre-election fiscal numbers.

There has been some agonising in the opposition about particular measures – notably scrapping the carbon tax compensation for new welfare recipients and a big cut to the Australian Renewable Energy Agency.

Labor's response, assuming it does agree to the omnibus bill, will be driven by its own imperative to keep its fiscal credibility rather than by a desire to co-operate with the government.

While a somersault on the carbon compensation removal could be argued for on the grounds that welfare recipients need the money (even in the absence of a carbon tax), for Labor to go back on its word would be giving the Coalition a hostage for the next election campaign. Broken

promises are poison these days.

On another front, Shorten this week has strengthened his language against the same-sex marriage plebiscite. As some in the LGBTI community intensify their campaign against a plebiscite, it seems increasingly likely Labor will oppose the machinery legislation to set this up. If the Greens also vote against, the plebiscite could be thwarted, because it is running into opposition among various of the non-Green crossbenchers too.

Paradoxically, Shorten might be doing Turnbull a favour if the plebiscite couldn't go ahead. With the Australian Electoral Commission's advising against it being held this year and Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett not wanting it interfering with his March 11 election, the proposed timing of any vote might be pushed beyond that, which would be distracting for the government as it prepared for the budget.

Even a February vote would drag out the debate longer than the Coalition would prefer.

Labor will put forward an early motion or private member's bill on same-sex marriage, hoping in part to get pro-marriage-equality Liberals to apply the heat on Turnbull to have the matter settled by parliament (with a free vote) if the plebiscite didn't happen. But it's extremely unlikely Turnbull would be able or want to fall back to that.

Also, given the plebiscite was an election pledge, he probably wouldn't face much pressure from those Liberals who would prefer a parliamentary vote. Liberal backbencher Warren Entsch, who fought strongly for same sex-marriage in the last parliament, says that if the plebiscite doesn't go ahead, the issue "is likely to stay unresolved until the next election".

In many ways Shorten is in a box seat as parliament begins, with Turnbull beset by difficult issues and politics. Turnbull is in conflict with critics in his own ranks – on superannuation, 18C – as well as with the opposition.

Labor this week exploited the superannuation argument by coming out with its own compromise plan (quickly rejected by Treasurer Scott Morrison) that involved getting rid of the "retrospective"

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element in the government policy that Liberal critics rail against.

Just as Tony Abbott did, Labor can use the power of negativity very destructively. The nature of the media cycle, where complaints become powerful and endlessly repeated stories, feeds into this. Shorten has the capacity to drive Turnbull to distraction – hence the game-playing over “pairs” – because of the government’s narrow lower house majority and the potential challenges of getting controversial measures through the Senate.

To achieve anything, the government will often be forced to resort to or accept lowest-common denominator outcomes when, ideally, problems require more robust approaches.

Shorten will want to cast Turnbull as a leader who can’t deliver. The danger for Shorten, however, is that if he overplays his hand he comes to be seen primarily as an opportunist rather than an alternative prime minister.

Abbott was condemned for negativity but protected by the unpopularity of the Gillard government. Shorten is no doubt aware of the danger. Protesting his desire to be co-operative and coming up with his own proposals are his forms of insulation. Whether the public will regard them as ruses we’ll see in the months ahead.

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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