

Albanese warns Labor over clean energy supplement in omnibus bill

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Federal MPs reassemble in Canberra on Monday ahead of Tuesday's opening of parliament, with the government talking up what the Coalition used to call a budget emergency and Labor keeping maximum pressure on Malcolm Turnbull on a range of issues.

Turnbull on Sunday rejected Tony Abbott's Friday claim that when it came to budget repair the government "has been in office – not in power". When the Abbott proposition was put to him he replied: "On the basis that we don't have a majority in the Senate? ... Governments normally, historically, have to negotiate with other parties in the Senate."

But how well those negotiations go between now and Christmas – to say nothing of some negotiations with the government's own backbench – will determine just how much power Turnbull can really exercise.

Invoking language that echoed Kevin Rudd's on climate change, Turnbull is casting budget repair in moral terms. "We have to make – and we are making – the moral case for budget repair," he told *The Australian*.

"There's a moral dimension here. Every dollar we borrow to fund our recurrent expenditure is a dollar we are borrowing from our children and grandchildren. Because we are borrowing from them, we have to bring the budget back into balance."

A Coalition party meeting on Monday will give an indication of the mood of its MPs, although sources said the government was not yet bringing its sensitive superannuation legislation, an internal flashpoint, to the party room.

On the eve of Labor's caucus meeting, senior frontbencher Anthony Albanese expressed concern about supporting the item in the government's A\$6.5 billion omnibus savings bill scrapping the clean energy supplement for new welfare recipients.

The word from Labor sources has been that the ALP is expected to vote for all the measures in

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the bill, which are ones it banked as savings before the election. But the ALP has reserved its position until it sees the legislation.

Albanese told Sky on Sunday night that Labor should be “very cautious about voting for anything that hurts some of the most underprivileged people in our community”. He said Labor should judge it “according to Labor values”.

This will effectively be a short parliamentary week, with Tuesday taken up with the ceremonial opening, including the election of the Speaker, who will again be Victorian Liberal Tony Smith; members and senators being sworn in, and the speech by Governor-General Peter Cosgrove but written by the government outlining its program. It will be Wednesday before the two sides clash in the first Question Time.

The government wants to get a good deal of industrial relations and budget legislation introduced as soon as possible although it will take some time for key bills to come to crunch votes in the Senate, testing the 11 non-Green crossbenchers. The government needs nine of them to pass bills that are opposed by Labor and the Greens.

Turnbull at the weekend defended his choosing to call a double dissolution, which has been criticised because of the resulting large crossbench and especially because it enabled four Hansonite senators to be elected.

“There were eight crossbenchers in the last Senate, six of whom were elected in the half Senate election of 2013. If we’d had another half Senate election this year rather than a double dissolution we could have reasonably expected another six crossbenchers elected, in which case we would have 12,” he told the ABC.

If the government hadn’t had the double dissolution it would have meant “it would not have had the courage of its convictions on the Australian Building and Construction Commission”. This and the legislation to toughen union governance could not get through the old Senate; the government is hopeful these bills may pass the new one, and also has the option of taking them to a joint sitting.

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Apart from budget repair, the new parliament's early weeks will see jostling over same-sex marriage, with the government's planned legislation to run a plebiscite now at high risk of defeat.

Shorten has ramped up his rhetoric against a plebiscite, and the indication from Labor is that it is likely to vote against the machinery to set one up, although on Sunday Shorten declined to lock in a firm position.

"We think a vote in the parliament is the quickest, cheapest, least divisive mechanism [to achieve same sex marriage]. We haven't seen Mr Turnbull's plebiscite legislation. We will cross the bridge of what he intends to do when he presents that legislation," Shorten said.

But Turnbull said the fastest way to achieve a vote on same-sex marriage in the parliament was via a plebiscite. He had no doubt a plebiscite would be carried.

He would not accept that the machinery legislation was doomed, or that Labor would oppose it. "The legislation will be introduced. It will be passed in the House and then we'll have to see how it goes in the Senate. I think Labor will support it."

Another early difficult issue for the government is dealing with Labor's pressure for a royal commission into the banks. Some Coalition backbenchers are pressing the government to set up a tribunal to give people a cheap and accessible way to get redress when they have been victims of bad behaviour by banks. Queensland Liberal Warren Entsch, an advocate of a tribunal, will have talks with colleagues on Monday.

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