



Bill Shorten has promised an all-out effort to promote a yes vote, while continuing to attack the ballot. Lukas Coch/AAP

The risk of armed conflict between North Korea and the US has moved a scary step closer in the last few days, with Donald Trump's belligerent threat of "fire and fury" against Pyongyang and its counter-threat of a missile strike near Guam.

The world – and our region in particular – is at a new and very high level of anxiety.

But despite the escalating seriousness of the situation, which if worse comes to worst could see Australia embroiled, it didn't rate nearly as much attention in federal politics this week as the battle over same-sex marriage. Such is the often surreal character of Canberra these days.

On the trivial front, that atmosphere of unreality saw Acting Special Minister of State Mathias Cormann on Twitter very late Wednesday night dealing with queries – and personal abuse – about the postal ballot to be held on whether to change the marriage law.

London-based journalist Latika Bourke, thanking Cormann for clarifying a point about expats voting, tweeted an obvious question: "But shouldn't you be asleep right now?"

"We never stop", replied the tireless Cormann, who'll be flat out for weeks overseeing the organisation of a controversial and difficult operation that is the offspring of political exigencies and flies in the face of sound process.

Cormann and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, two Liberal conservatives whose support is essential to the embattled Malcolm Turnbull's survival, are both known to want the marriage issue cleared away.

Dutton was an early advocate of a postal vote, when the Senate wouldn't pass legislation for a plebiscite. Cormann, who brought the submission to cabinet, crafted the postal scheme, which will be under the auspices of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and is [officially called](#) a "voluntary survey", to the delight of sarcastic Labor critics.

Incidentally, both these cabinet ministers will be voting no, as will Treasurer Scott Morrison, notably at odds with their leader.

It's long been clear that, in the coming months, Turnbull will be struggling to land a credible energy policy, with the Finkel recommendation for a clean energy target producing some sharp fractures in the ranks.

But then he was blindsided by a backbench revolt calling for a quick parliamentary vote on same-sex marriage, that's perversely led to this course involving – if the ballot [survives the High Court](#) – a long, acrimonious campaign.

So Turnbull, who this week saw his government behind in the 17th consecutive Newspoll, has two deeply divisive issues to manage simultaneously and no political capital to draw on.

Regardless of many polls showing high public support for marriage reform, the campaign starts with its outcome unpredictable.

The "no" side, with Tony Abbott striding out waving its flag on Wednesday, will be highly motivated and organised. In contrast, many "yes" supporters are conflicted, because of widespread scepticism about the ballot, and anger in sections of the gay community.

The government is handing one advantage to the "no" campaigners by proposing not to release a draft bill that would be introduced if the vote is carried.

It says it would facilitate a private member's bill; as a starter, some in the government point to the bill Dean Smith, one of the rebels, has produced. The Smith bill has good protections for those with religious objections, though they don't satisfy the hardliners.

But the absence of detail on the extent of protections that would be legislated under the government's auspices makes it easy for the "no" side to scaremonger.

The ballot has injected a further element of danger for Turnbull as he moves towards the year's end, which is a potential killing season for a struggling leader.

If a "no" win were announced on November 15, meaning the issue was officially dead as far as the government was concerned, what would then happen? Would the pro-reform Liberal rebels fire up again and actually cross the floor, rather than retreating under party pressure, as they did early this week? How would the right-wing Liberals then react?

Late on Thursday Bill Shorten promised an all-out effort to promote a yes vote, while continuing to attack the ballot.

In a fired-up [parliamentary performance](#) , Shorten said:

The strongest supporters of this survey have always been the most vocal opponents of marriage equality ...The opponents of marriage equality have set this process up to fail.

But we cannot let illegitimate tactics deter us, we cannot sit on the sidelines.

I understand the sense of frustration and betrayal by the parliament for LGBTI Australians. But the most powerful act of resistance and defiance is to vote yes to equality.

He told business leaders, sporting clubs, unions and community groups that “it is time now to get involved”, and declared: “I will be campaigning for a yes vote”.

Despite the rather messy mixed message that the process is bad but people should still vote yes and campaign, Labor reckons it is in a no-lose situation politically.

Shorten, it seems, will be putting a lot more effort into the campaign than Turnbull, who has already signalled it won't be a major priority for him. Turnbull wants to limit his investment in case the result comes out negative.

If the ballot backs reform, Labor will claim the credit. And it will be able to do this, because Shorten will have been very visible.

Labor could walk away from a negative outcome relatively easily, blaming process and a divided government, and saying the result was out of kilter with widely measured community views. Shorten is sticking by his pledge that if the reform isn't made this term, a Labor government would legislate same-sex marriage in its first 100 days.

And if the vote went down, Shorten would stand to benefit from what would be serious fallout for Turnbull.

But while Shorten has little at risk, his campaigning could come to Turnbull's aid. Shorten is good on the stump, and if he puts his back into the task, he could potentially mobilise a lot of yes votes.

If Shorten helps get a positive vote over the line, that would bring some protection for Turnbull.

Just another touch of the surreal.

Grattan on Friday: Shorten's campaigning in postal ballot might help protect a vulnerable Turnbull

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