

Important detail is being debated but for all intents and purposes the same-sex marriage issue is over. The Coalition conservatives don't have the numbers to insert egregious amendments into the bill that's now before parliament.

Malcolm Turnbull had a glass of champagne and, along with millions of Australians, gloried in the moment this week when the nation delivered its [historic decision](#).

Senator Dean Smith, one of the five Liberals who forced the issue back on the government's agenda, told the Senate this had been "a vote about who we are as a people".

It has been a strange tale, when you look back on it.

Remember that the plan for a popular vote (though not one by post) originated in a desperate "save me" ploy from embattled then-prime minister Tony Abbott in 2015. Turnbull condemned the idea of a plebiscite, but had to embrace it as part of realising his own leadership ambitions. Labor was committed to marriage equality but refused to back a February plebiscite that would by now have seen many gays married.

Despite its dubious ancestry, the popular vote has done its job, delivering an overall majority and majorities in all states and territories.

That's more than you can say for most referendums (which of course this was not). And it brings to mind the contrast between the effectiveness of this vote and the exhaustive consultative process over years that was supposed to culminate in a referendum to recognise our First Australians in the Constitution.

That process stretched through governments of different hues and tapped into Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Abbott hoped for a May 2017 referendum, timing always optimistic and then overtaken by events.

Paradoxically, the longer the consultative process went, the smaller became the prospect of a plan emerging that would be acceptable to Indigenous people, the government and the broad community.

Finally it culminated in the Reconciliation Council's proposal for a national Indigenous representative assembly, predictably unacceptable to the Turnbull government.

In whatever way blame is distributed, my point is that for a variety of reasons a copybook consultative process failed miserably – there will be no referendum in the foreseeable future – while the widely criticised popular vote on marriage delivered the goods, albeit with some downsides posed by such a campaign.

So Australia this year has done the right thing by the nation's LGBTI community but, despite earlier aspirations, has again failed its First Peoples. An opportunity that once seemed to be there was missed and now probably the time has passed.

When parliament resumes the week after next for its final fortnight of the year, much of its time will be taken with the marriage bill, but it will be the [citizenship declarations](#) MPs must submit by December 1 that will be jangling the political nerves.

Those will be followed in the subsequent week by referrals to the High Court. Several are expected already. The government has flagged it intends to refer at least two Labor MPs who moved to renounce their citizenship before they nominated but didn't receive confirmation until afterwards. [Turnbull has told](#) the Nick Xenophon Team's Rebekha Sharkie that her eligibility may have to be determined by the High Court.

This week the High Court gave another literalist ruling, when it decided that Liberal Hollie Hughes was [ineligible to replace](#) former senator Fiona Nash because Hughes had held an office of profit under the Crown (she was appointed this year to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, from which she quickly resigned when the court ruled against Nash).

The message seems that anyone sent to the High Court shouldn't be expecting any mercy.

Much as Turnbull wants to go into the new year in an orderly way, the parliament will start 2018 in disorder if the High Court judgments produce byelections. By the time these were out of the way, the government would be only about a year from an election, assuming it runs full term.

If any 2018 byelections were confined to non-Coalition seats – there are two in Coalition seats currently – the government wouldn't be worried about its parliamentary numbers but it would be anxious about the size of swings.

The citizenship crisis and the marriage ballot have crowded out everything else, but in the background the government's energy plan has yet to be bedded down, with the key meeting delayed by the Queensland election. While the win on marriage is a morale-boosting fillip for Turnbull, what he can or can't deliver on energy is much closer to the electoral bone.

Turnbull in late December or early in the new year will undertake a reshuffle, which is becoming more pressing with the elevation of Scott Ryan to the Senate presidency and the loss of Nash producing a now-depleted ministry. By then, Barnaby Joyce will be back.

Some repair will be needed in relations within the Coalition. These became fractured after the blame Liberals hurled at the Nationals over their citizenship carelessness – before the [Liberals &rsquo; own was exposed](#)

But the tensions run deeper. The Nationals are frustrated at the government's parlous situation. All but one of their electorates came in with a "yes" result but the Nationals believe the marriage issue won't bring them any votes and has been a distraction from what matters to their grassroots.

They see it as a Liberal Party preoccupation. Even many Liberals regard it, in electoral terms, primarily as removing an irritant rather than being a vote magnet at the election.

The Nationals don't want the Liberals to change their leader. But they do want Turnbull's attention firmly on bread and butter issues. And they despair that he can't get a better line and

## Grattan on Friday: In 2017, Australia has delivered to the LGBTI community but failed its First Peoples

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length on Bill Shorten.

For all his troubles Turnbull will go into the summer seemingly safe in his job, not least for lack of a better alternative. Anyway, who'd want it just now?

*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 their academic appointment.*

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