

## Grattan on Friday: For Bill Shorten, it will be a matter of eyes left and centre

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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In the early months of 2018 Bill Shorten will have the tough challenge of juggling his pitches to Labor's two bases – its progressive and its traditional supporters.

The byelection in the inner Melbourne seat of Batman, which follows the [exit of Labor's David Feeney on Thursday](#), is a race that will be run on the left side of the political field.

The Greens have a great chance to give their one lower house MP, Adam Bandt, a colleague. Labor will be under particular pressure on awkward issues, especially the proposed Queensland Adani mine and its stance on refugees. It was notable that this week Shorten, asked about Adani, sounded more cautious and cooler than previously. The Greens, mobilised in Batman on that issue, will pursue him relentlessly.

There's a good deal of pessimism in Labor about the byelection, but some see a few bright spots. Feeney dragged down the Labor's vote in 2016. There's bad blood within the Greens. And Labor's left-aligned candidate, ACTU president Ged Kearney, will strongly prosecute progressive and cost of living issues.

While Batman carries high stakes for Shorten – losing it would be a major setback with implications well beyond the forfeit of a Labor number – it is also something of a niche contest. The Liberals don't even intend to turn up with a candidate.

The main national game is firmly on the centre ground. And if byelections come in other Labor seats as a consequence of the citizenship imbroglio, it would be mostly on that ground where Shorten would be fighting.

Especially worrying for Labor is the likeliest contest - in the Queensland electorate of Longman, where ALP MP Susan Lamb [didn't provide adequate documentation](#) to the British authorities and so remains a dual citizen.

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Her argument is that she did all she reasonably could to renounce her British citizenship – a proposition which will be tested if, as expected, the government refers her to the High Court, together with two other Labor MPs and crossbencher [Rebekha Sharkie](#) .

In a byelection in Longman, which Labor holds by less than 1%, Shorten would need to appeal to blue collar and other workers who'd be more likely to register any protest by voting One Nation (whose preferences helped the ALP last time) than Green. The Liberal National Party believes the previous member, Wyatt Roy, lost it votes and that it would have a good chance of regaining the seat when it had another candidate.

Late last year the government was in a world of pain with byelections in New England and Bennelong (in the event, both turned out very well for it). Now the pain is all Labor's.

More broadly, Shorten for a long time seemed to have the political breaks running his way, but suddenly things have turned. Beyond the citizenship crisis, the economy is looking better, and Malcolm Turnbull's performance has lifted.

A nightmare scenario for Shorten would be to lose both Batman and Longman.

If Batman went, it would open a debate within the Labor party about whether it was doing enough to meet the challenge of the Green vote at the next election.

The timing of a Batman defeat would be in the run-up to the ALP's July national conference. Probably it would sharpen the conference arguments, potentially making that much-publicised event look more like a battleground than the showcase Shorten needs, given the election would be at most about nine months away and possibly much closer.

If, in addition to a Batman loss, Longman changed hands, that would present a crisis for Shorten and Labor.

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It would increase the government's majority and destabilise Shorten's leadership. Whether that destabilisation would turn into any move against him can't be predicted, except to say Anthony Albanese retains his ambition. Albanese, who slapped down a strong Green push in his Sydney electorate of Grayndler in 2016, will strut his stuff in the Batman campaign.

Shorten's position is protected by Labor's rules, which make a leadership change very difficult. He has also had the security blanket of the polls, that have seen the ALP consistently in front.

But within the ALP there's concern that he is not liked by voters or fully trusted by them. Those worries would intensify if the government's polling improved.

In the months ahead he has to be careful. He can't afford the sort of exaggeration he indulged in last year when he claimed too vehemently that Labor had a foolproof vetting system to deal with dual citizenship. The crowing brought a short term sugar hit but the legacy is the perception that he was having a lend of us.

On another front, he was careless this week with some loose language that invited speculation Labor might cut the health insurance rebate. This was quickly hosed down, but it allowed the government to raise a scare.

Ahead of parliament's return on Monday, both Shorten and Turnbull delivered scene-setting speeches this week.

[Turnbull had nothing new](#) but again dangled the prospect of tax cuts for middle income earners. The timing of these and how much they'd be worth - especially when the planned hike in the Medicare levy is taken into account - remain known unknowns.

While the Prime Minister, polls notwithstanding, does seem to be reviving politically, he is still facing a cynical and disappointed electorate that will be hard to please. It will take more than modest tax cuts to bring many voters round.

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Turnbull has a strong case as the numbers show an improving economy and an impressive jobs record. But with flat wages and the high cost of living, Labor can exploit people's feeling that the better times are not flowing through to their household budgets.

[Shorten highlighted](#) "the disconnect between wages and productivity" in his speech, and held out the prospect of addressing it, and achieving an adequate "living wage".

That raises both the public's expectations and the hackles of a business community nervous about what changes an ALP government might make to rebalance the strength of employers and workers in the industrial relations system.

No doubt there will be plenty of calls during the Batman campaign for some of the detail of what Labor plans.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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