

Given how important Saturday's Batman byelection is for Bill Shorten's political momentum, it is very odd – to say the least – that the opposition decided to make its latest tax announcement in the campaign's last week.

Labor is in a head-to-head battle with the Greens in Batman. ALP sources are talking down the chances of their candidate, former ACTU president Ged Kearney, though the party is not writing off the seat.

It was entirely predictable that the opposition's plan to scrap cash refunds for excess dividend imputation credits would generate some backlash and a big scare campaign from the government.

The plan is designed to hit the wealthy, and reap a large revenue yield (AU\$11.4 billion over the forward estimates and \$59 billion over a decade), which Labor can use for income tax cuts and other things. But it would catch some 14,000 full pensioners and 200,000 on a part pension (on ALP numbers).

The change would mean imputation credits could only be offset against a tax liability. At present, individuals and superannuation funds get a cash refund if their imputation credits exceed the tax they owe.

Maybe the ALP thought – if it took the byelection into account at all – that the target-the-rich message would go down well in Batman (where about one fifth of voters are in the age group 65 and over). But that's not the way it appears to be working out, according to focus groups conducted in the electorate by Landscape Research for the University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis.

The issue was canvassed in four groups (two older, two younger), each of eight to nine "soft" voters (those who hadn't made definite decisions on how to vote), held on Tuesday and Wednesday - hard on the heels of the Tuesday Labor announcement. While focus group research has no statistical basis, it is used extensively, especially by political parties, to tap into voters' opinions.

The tax policy was raised spontaneously in both the older and younger groups, although the details were not understood. There was a sharp age difference in concern. The younger voters didn't feel affected and weren't inclined to grapple with the complexities. As one participant put it: "Most of it went over my head to be honest".

The retirees generally had a negative impression of the policy. To cite a range of comments: "it's totally wrong and very scary"; "you sock your money away into super to look after yourself and then they pull the rug out from under you"; "another group of pensioners being hit by this extra tax - it's not fair"; "sends the wrong message to a lot of people"; "I'm worried about this latest tax on superannuation - not that I've got any shares, but everybody has if they've got superannuation".

The move caused some questioning of Labor's commitment to its traditional values; there was a feeling it had misjudged the impact of the policy in the countdown to the byelection. "Labor's always been for the working man, and for the pensioners, and that seems to be not so much the case [with this policy]," said a male retiree.

Shorten also came in for a caning in the groups over his handling of the Adani issue, on which he has toughened his line to try to prevent a haemorrhage to the Greens in the seat. He was widely derided by both older and younger voters for what they saw as his opportunistic positioning. They were aware of his trying to straddle the imperatives of Batman and Queensland.

"He's saying different things in different states to please different groups of voters"; "he's flip-flopped ... there's no consistency and there's certainly no integrity"; "he's just hedging his bets"; "he's a politician - his job is to win"; "I don't like the way he's equivocated about the Adani mine. He's telling the Queenslanders he's for it and he's telling us down here he's against it. He's like a reed in the wind".

If Batman - traditionally a Labor stronghold but nearly won by the Greens in 2016 - were lost by a narrow margin, there would be soul searching about the timing of the refund announcement.

As the blowback from the tax move became clear, Labor was under pressure to produce some cushioning for the pensioners hit. It discounted a suggestion that it might modify this policy, but

flagged the likelihood of other initiatives for them in its policy bag for the general election.

For Shorten Batman is particularly significant because it could be the first of several contests in Labor seats, in the fallout from the citizenship crisis.

Soon the High Court will rule on ACT senator Katy Gallagher. She moved to renounce her British citizenship but the process had not been completed by the time she nominated. Labor maintains she had taken all reasonable steps, an argument disputed by the Solicitor-General, Stephen Donaghue, in the court this week.

If the court decision goes against Gallagher, that would act as a precedent, with the knock-on effect that Shorten would almost certainly face a byelection in the Queensland seat of Longman, where Susan Lamb would have an uphill challenge to hang on, and probably in a couple of other Labor electorates.

As in Batman, the Adani mine would feature heavily in a Longman contest, although in that seat Shorten would be under pressure mostly from supporters rather than opponents. He would carry the “flip flop” reputation he has acquired into that contest, making the issue even harder for him there.

If Labor held Batman, Shorten would be in a better position to exploit Malcolm Turnbull’s passing 30 consecutive negative Newspolls which will happen within weeks, unless there is an unexpected improvement (he is up to 28).

But if the views of these soft voters are any guide, there is little interest in this benchmark among ordinary people.

They were perplexed that it was even raised as an issue in the discussion. They don’t think there is anyone waiting in the wings to oust Turnbull, or any momentum for a change of leadership, especially when compared with the very public awareness of internal Liberal manoeuvrings when Tony Abbott was overthrown.

Grattan on Friday: Shorten scores own goals on tax and Adani with Batman 'soft' voters

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

“No one’s going to knife him”, said one participant while another asked rhetorically, “Who could take over?”

One younger male did note that the Opposition would be “merciless”, making Turnbull’s life “hell” in parliament’s question time. But the 30 Newspoll benchmark may loom a good deal larger in the minds of politicians – especially that of Abbott - and the media than with voters.

Michelle Grattan ne travaille pas, ne conseille pas, ne possède pas de parts, ne reçoit pas de fonds d'une organisation qui pourrait tirer profit de cet article, et n'a déclaré aucune autre affiliation que son poste universitaire.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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