

View from The Hill: 'Super Saturday' voters get first say on tax

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The coming winter “Super Saturday” of five byelections, spread across and up and down the country, has given the battle over tax an early, sharp focal point.

Labor is supporting the first step of the budget’s income tax [plan](#) , that helps middle and lower income earners. The Opposition is, however, wary and critical of the plan’s latter stage, flattening the tax scale and favouring higher earners.

The government introduced the tax legislation on Wednesday and wants it passed quickly and intact. Malcolm Turnbull said it would not split the package - “it is one tax reform plan”. With four of the five byelections in ALP seats, could Labor afford to play hardball over this?

Then there’s the timing of Labor’s tax counter plan. Without Super Saturday – the date of which is yet to be set – the opposition could have sensibly held back the detail of that. But in the new context, it would be better to have the ALP alternative out there in full.

We’ll get a clearer indication of Bill Shorten’s strategy when he delivers his budget reply on Thursday night. His speech has taken on extra significance now.

When the planned timing of the High Court [decision](#) in the citizenship case of ACT Labor senator Katy Gallagher became known, ministers could hardly believe it. They feared their voter-friendly budget would be blown away.

And indeed the court has totally changed the dynamics of this budget week.

Read more: [**Politics podcast: Mathias Cormann and Jim Chalmers on Budget 2018**](#)

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The [ruling](#) against Gallagher wasn't unexpected. Even so, we've become so punch drunk from the citizenship affair that it's easy to overlook the magnitude of Wednesday's developments.

The latest round of the crisis cost the federal parliament five people in one day. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

Three Labor MPs and one crossbencher announced they would resign following Gallagher's disqualification.

Once again, the constitution's Section 44 has thrown a grenade into federal politics, with a swag of immediate casualties and, in the longer term, unpredictable fallout.

The Super Saturday contests span four states – two are in Western Australia (Josh Wilson in Fremantle, Tim Hammond in Perth), and one in each of Queensland (Susan Lamb in Longman), Tasmania (Justine Keay in Braddon) and South Australia (Centre Alliance's Rebekha Sharkie in Mayo). One of the byelections has nothing to do with citizenship – Hammond is quitting for [family reasons](#)

Among the seats, all eyes will be on Longman, where the ALP is on a knife edge margin (0.8%) and Braddon (2.2%), as well as Mayo, where Sharkie will face a strong Liberal challenge. Her Liberal opponent is expected to be Georgina Downer, daughter of the former foreign minister Alexander Downer, who once held the seat.

The Super Saturday results will be important collectively, as well for the outcomes in the individual seats. If significant swings were in one direction, that would be a statement about the national mood.

Labor has seats at risk; if any one of the five changes hands, it will be to the Coalition. But if the ALP does well – and byelections typically swing against governments - that would give Shorten extra momentum.

Read more: [Dual citizenship debacle claims five more MPs – and sounds a stern warning for future parliamentarians](#)

Shorten has been tarnished by the citizenship affair. He was foolishly cocky that all his MPs were compliant with the constitution. He argues now that the High Court has altered its interpretation of the citizenship provision; Attorney-General Christian Porter says this is a nonsense.

But will Labor's carelessness, or that of its candidates, matter to those casting their votes? It's hard to predict. Barnaby Joyce and John Alexander weren't marked down in their byelections.

Labor has now submitted a new application for Lamb to renounce her British citizenship. It has been told by the United Kingdom Home Office this will be processed without the marriage certificate that had been sought originally but Lamb had failed to produce.

This highlights that Lamb was not diligent enough before the election. Her citizenship will be fixed in time for her to run, but the situation reflects badly on her.

Despite the all-round damage done by the citizenship saga, the government isn't inclined to try to amend the constitution to make the section's requirement simpler to meet. It doesn't think a referendum would pass and it is not willing to use political capital on it.

The looming "mini election" has seen speculation that Turnbull might call the general election early. But in his round of post-budget interviews he again said the election would be next year. Sources say this is his position privately as well as publicly. Given that the government needs all the time it can get to try to improve its fortunes, there is no reason to doubt him.

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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