

Grattan on Friday: Shorten's not getting ahead of himself, but the tape measure is out

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

With the election likely to be called in about a fortnight – the weekend after the April 2 budget - behind the scenes Labor is “measuring the curtains” of government.

Any sign of hubris must be avoided, but a prudent opposition – especially with polls suggesting it's soon likely to be the executive - needs to be well prepared for the first days of office.

One advantage Labor has is that its leader and many senior figures have been in power before. They have experience in setting up offices, establishing relations with the bureaucracy, working out early priorities.

Labor's main frontbenchers would move into the ministries they've been “shadowing”. But there would inevitably be some shuffling for others.

One question the government keeps asking (not unreasonably) is who would hold the crucial Home Affairs post.

There is no current “shadow” for Home Affairs. Shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus has the national security area - Dreyfus is expected in government to be attorney-general but not home affairs minister.

The Home Affairs department, controversial since its inception, is itself in the frame.

Labor's platform commits it to review the Home Affairs portfolio arrangements “to ensure they are fit for purpose”. Assuming the department survived, a major issue would be whether it lost oversight of two key agencies, the Australian Federal Police and ASIO.

The Australian Federal Police Association recently called for the AFP to be shifted back as a stand-alone agency under the attorney-general's umbrella, [saying](#) this should be done “to

protect its organisational independence”.

ASIO – like the AFP, formerly under the attorney-general – also does not look comfortable under Home Affairs.

In the security community the future of the department’s secretary Mike Pezzullo under a Shorten government is a matter of intense interest.

Pezzullo has a past with Labor (in the office of opposition leader Kim Beazley); now he’s strongly identified with the Coalition’s harsh asylum seeker policy, as well as being seen as one of the toughest operators in the bureaucracy.

Labor sources say “there is a debate” about what should be done with Pezzullo. Retaining him would have the advantage of sending a signal to the people smugglers about no weakening in border policy, something Labor would want to do from the start.

One senior public servant certainly for the chop under Labor (if he didn’t quit first) is Treasury secretary Phil Gaetjens. He was chief of staff to Scott Morrison when Morrison was treasurer, and the opposition regarded his appointment as highly partisan.

Read more: [**Changing of the guard at the Treasury department**](#)

Among the names being canvassed to replace him are Jenny Wilkinson, head of the Parliamentary Budget Office (which is doing the opposition’s policy costings); Steven Kennedy, secretary of the Infrastructure department, and Blair Comley, a former departmental head sacked by Tony Abbott, who became secretary of the NSW Premier’s department and is now in the private sector.

If Wilkinson got the job, she'd be the first female head of Treasury. If she didn't, she'd be presiding over a PBO with an expanded role. Labor has said it would transfer the budget's macro-economic forecasting to the PBO to remove the number-crunching from political influence.

Of course all this is running in front of the story. As the election contest turns into the home straight, Bill Shorten is several lengths ahead in the polls. But he still has to win the race.

Read more: [*Poll wrap: Labor gains in Newspoll after weak economic report; Labor barely ahead in NSW*](#)

Labor will have to navigate some difficult policy announcements in coming weeks.

On climate change, it must outline final details of what it would do – in particular, the measures it would take in the non-electricity sectors (transport, large industry, land) as part of reaching its ambitious target of reducing economy-wide emissions by 45% by 2030. It is also to reveal whether it would use Australia's Kyoto credits to help meet the target.

On industrial relations, Labor has flagged it would change the legislation governing the Fair Work Commission's setting of the minimum wage, to achieve a more generous deal for the low paid. But it has yet to say precisely what new principles it would insert. And it will have to be more specific about the extent of its support for the return of what it calls "multi-employer" bargaining.

An especially sensitive announcement will be the date for the commencement of the crackdown on negative gearing and the capital gains tax discount. When the policy was unveiled in the last term, the housing market was over-heated. The situation has transformed, with downturns led by Sydney and Melbourne.

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Setting an appropriate implementation date will require careful judgment about likely future trends in the market and the policy's impact on them.

Arguably, it would be politically savvy for Labor to make one or more of these announcements quickly, before the campaign proper.

The government will try to use the budget to change the game as much as it can, and Labor can't anticipate how far that will happen.

The budget is expected to contain big tax cuts. Shorten will possess the fiscal capacity to match these, but Labor will have to decide whether and how it would distribute them differently.

An ardent practitioner of continuous electioneering, one would expect Shorten to put in a disciplined performance during the actual campaign.

Labor can be confident he'd never have anything as excruciating as NSW opposition leader Michael Daley's experience this week during a people's forum with Gladys Berejiklian, when he couldn't recall key details from his education promises.

Confronted over one number, Daley said "I'll just check that figure and get back to you"; he didn't remember another "off the top of my head".

Still, campaigners are obstacle courses even for the most seasoned players.

The election result will show whether the voters are willing to go along with Labor's bold policies. We do know these have been carefully thought out, not made up on the run. We can expect Labor's transition-to-government plans to be given similar attention.

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But there is another challenge a prospective prime minister needs to think about.

With a fickle electorate, an often feral media, and the torment of regular opinion polls, how does a government handle the public impatience that can make the business of governing for the long term so difficult, sometimes nearly impossible, these days?

This feature of modern politics can be as testing as winning an election.

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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