

Grattan on Friday: The campaign with built-in R R for voters

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Politically speaking, the Easter break is a blessing for a jaded electorate, at least a partial rest for voters' eyes and ears in a campaign that's started as an impossibly complex jumble of claims and numbers.

For Bill Shorten, Easter might also act as an eraser to rub out people's memories of a scratchy couple of days in the first week.

In the intensity of a campaign a slip – in this case, Shorten's assertion Labor wouldn't increase taxes on superannuation when it has announced proposed changes – will blow out of proportion.

It wasn't a huge blunder but it was damaging, a lapse of concentration. "I think the last day or two hurt" a pro-Shorten source said, while adding that the problem had occurred at the right stage – that is, early on. By Thursday, Shorten seemed back on track.

Read more: [**View from The Hill: Those tax cuts should follow proper process, officials tell government**](#)

Shorten's slip came in responding to persistent questioning at a daily news conference. The reporters following the leaders are being tough interrogators, refusing to take no answer for an answer, which is good.

On the other side, Peter Dutton's sledging his disabled opponent was a whopping own goal (as well as being appalling of itself).

The difference in the import of these mistakes, however, is that Shorten is the opposition leader

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knocking on the prime ministerial door, carrying a bag of controversial policies, with some voters still making up their minds about him. Dutton is just running for survival in Dickson.

The take-out from week one of the campaign is that while Shorten was less sure-footed than expected, you'd still rather be in his shoes than Morrison's.

"My view is that people are disconnected and have made their minds up. They are fed up with us," says an LNP source from Queensland. A Victorian Liberal finds "no evidence of any change since Christmas".

Another Liberal believes there is "a tightening – I'm not predicting a win but Labor's definitely feeling the pressure, starting to get a bit nervous."

It wouldn't be surprising if Shorten were nervous. Contrast 2016, when the general view was Labor would lose. This time, with the opposite expectation, a loss would be devastating for Shorten and disastrous for a party that's chosen to make itself a very big target.

The superannuation glitch will fade, but Shorten is more fundamentally vulnerable over Labor's commitment to an ambitious emissions reduction policy.

The Liberals will ramp up a massive post-Easter assault on this; how convincingly Shorten can counter – as well as business's reaction - will be crucial to the campaign's next stage.

Later in the campaign, Labor's costings and fiscal bottom line – it will have bigger projected surpluses than the government - will be both a test of its economic credibility and an opportunity to defuse the Coalition's "scare" about a Shorten government's hand on the economy.

Incidentally, one "scare" missing in any serious sense so far has been over border security. The government might have hoped to wheel this out as a result of the Medevac legislation. It warned of an influx, amid the fanfare of reopening Christmas Island.

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But as far as we know, no one has come under that legislation. Apart from the deterrent effect of Christmas Island, presumably those offshore and their supporters want to deny the government easy access to a “scare” that could boost its chances of re-election.

The nature of the coalition’s hit-them-hard campaign is reflected in its advertising. An analysis of the first week done by Andrew Hughes, from the Australian National University’s Research School of Management, found an extremely high 93% of Liberal ads on Facebook were negative, although the limited advertising in the mainstream media was more positive.

“Labor are going for a far more positive campaign – be it on social or traditional media,” Hughes [writes](#) in AdNews. What negative advertising Labor has been running uses Tony Abbott and Peter Dutton to remind voters of the coup against Malcolm Turnbull.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: Peter Dutton – Labor's not-so-secret weapon against Hunt and Sukkar*](#)

Usually week one is marked by a debate about debates. Leaders’ debates used to be important, to contenders and media. Not now. One has been lined up in Perth by the West Australian for Monday week - Shorten agreed but sounded reluctant. But so far nothing has been arranged in the east. The National Press Club says it has a submission in and is waiting for the parties to respond.

Often it is the opposition leader who’s anxious for a face-to-face encounter, because it can be a chance to best the incumbent. But for Shorten, the favourite, the risk may be greater than the opportunity.

This public-holiday heavy campaign is further complicated by Anzac Day, on Thursday, after which the pace will really accelerate.

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Pre-polling, increasingly important, starts on Monday April 29 – well before Labor’s formal campaign launch on Sunday May 5 in Brisbane.

The parties can’t afford just to build their campaigns to a peak in the final week. They need also to give attention to the early voters. (One theory is that some disillusioned voters will get to the polling stations quickly, so they can then switch off the whole uninspiring spectacle.)

The public benchmark against which any movement resulting from the first week will be judged is Labor’s 52-48% margin in the Newspoll conducted after the election was announced.

Read more: [**Labor maintains 52-48% lead in Newspoll as vote polarises**](#)

In that poll, the Coalition had lifted its primary vote a point to 39%. To win, however, this needs to be in the low 40s. In 2016 the government just held on with a primary of 42%. The Liberals claim there is a big “soft” vote out there – people who are not firmly locked in.

Polling does not simply measure the progress in a campaign – it affects it.

If the Coalition closed the gap in Newspoll to trail 49-51%, that would change the dynamics significantly, especially as Labor is exposed in several of its own seats.

If, despite Labor’s comfortable lead in the polls through the parliamentary term, this battle becomes line ball, the spectre of a hung parliament comes into distant view.

That would be a very long shot, but one with a lot of downsides as an outcome.

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