

Malcolm Turnbull in a muddle over Senate vote direction

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As Sam Dastyari said on Wednesday: “There has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian senator.”

Generally speaking, you would be entitled to expect that a person taking on the top job in this country would come to that office with some idea of where he wanted to take us. Malcolm Turnbull is the traveller who turns up at the airport not knowing which plane to catch and no idea of his destination. The plane therefore was not booked and neither was the hotel.

The way the Senate debate went this week was not too difficult to pick for those with some experience of Australian politics. I knew it would be a roller-coaster ride but even then I could not have foreseen the utter shambles that debate became.

While I am a great admirer of Niki Savva and her column, her statement that “each policy announced has been well thought through” (you don’t need the fingers of one hand to count them — at this rate the well-thought- out budget won’t be delivered until next year) looks very odd when applied to a few days in the Senate, which saw the Liberals vote against a debate on the Australian Building and Construction Commission bill and the Greens vote against a debate on introducing same-sex marriage. If that was part of the Prime Minister’s plan, then he has no idea what he is doing. The government and the Greens make for strange bedfellows at the best of times.

Savva was right when she wrote that trying to kill two birds (the ABCC and Senate voting reform) showed “unadulterated self-interest on Labor’s part”. As demonstrated by the voting farce outlined in the previous paragraph, the determination to act in their own self-interest has forced the new Senate coalition of Greens, Liberals and Nationals to vote against their core belief systems and make themselves look utterly ridiculous.

Now to obtain a trigger for a double dissolution, the PM will be compelled to try to rush through an ABCC debate on one day, when convention suggests contentious legislation tends to be debated over many days and nights in a Senate where the government doesn’t have a majority.

Just how stupid would the PM look if he made the short trip from the Lodge to the Governor-General’s residence in Yarralumla to ask for a double dissolution on the grounds that twice the Senate refused to support debate on his ABCC bill, even though on one of those occasions it was the government he leads that voted against bringing on that debate.

Even if Turnbull had the gall to ask, it would be difficult for any governor-general to set a precedent for calling a double dissolution on the mere rejection of bringing on a debate rather than a rejection of the bill itself. Given the prime ministerial collusion in holding out on the debate this week, Peter Cosgrove would be placed in an impossible position.

There is real anger among both frontbench and backbench MPs and senators on the government side that Senate voting reform is a fringe issue for most, while prosecuting proper debate and legislation on reviving the ABCC is at the very core of their political ethic. There is no method in this muddle. It is just a muddle of one man’s making — the man whose job security now seems to dominate all thought and discussion on election timing and policy formation: the Prime Minister.

The dalliance between the Liberals and the Greens is already causing angst among members and supporters of both parties. Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger really set the cat among the pigeons with his intervention on this question last week. Preferencing the Greens in electorates where Labor might be vulnerable is good short-term politics but dreadful in the long term. The

changes to the way Australians elect their senators may well end the chances of the Muirs and the Days being elected, but the fallout doesn't stop there. These changes will consolidate the Greens and cement the Senate as a chamber where the government of the day will almost never have a majority.

The Greens vote against government legislation more than 90 per cent of the time, so it is difficult to understand why it would be to the government's advantage to put more of them in the lower house. The Greens response to all this, of course, is to say they won't preference the Liberals and I'm sure they are telling the truth and nothing but the truth. You might wonder why I did not include the middle part of that famous phrase — "the whole truth". Put simply, the Greens are omitting to say that any arrangement to receive lower house preferences from the Liberals would involve distributing an open ticket in the chosen seats where Labor could lose. If the normal Greens preference flow to Labor is about 80 per cent or even more, then imagine the advantage to the government if that flow dropped to 50 or 60 per cent. I wonder if Richard Di Natale would care to respond to that.

It is worth recalling that when Meg Lees acceded to Liberal demands to support the introduction of a GST, she signed not only her own death warrant but that of her party as well. The Democrats were in disunity and disarray. The rank and file imploded and half the parliamentary party openly revolted and the party established by Don Chipp to keep the bastards honest ceased to exist.

The Greens' base in the inner cities is largely professional, well-read and well-educated. It is hard to see them being too impressed with this kind of old-fashioned backroom bastardry. There are many in the Liberal Party who are violently against entrenching a party such as the Greens as a permanent third force.

There are lessons from the US and Britain about taking the party rank and file for granted. Grassroots Republicans have ignored the machine while displaying an almost manic determination to elect Donald Trump as their candidate. In Britain, the Labor Party rank and file doesn't seem to care it has elected Jeremy Corbyn, who is utterly unelectable as PM. If I were Di Natale I would give this a little more thought.