

Coalition deeply divided into conservative and progressive camps

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With Parliament resuming next week, it is worth recalling that its last sitting week was dominated by two events. The push to reform the Senate voting system was fully foreshadowed and went to plan. Not foreseen was the Coalition backbencher push, led by Queensland Nationals member George Christensen, to abolish unacceptable aspects of the disingenuously named Safe Schools program.

Once ignited, Christensen's campaign took off like wildfire, with 43 members and senators writing to Malcolm Turnbull demanding that he and his complicit Minister for Education, Senator Simon Birmingham, get off the fence and address their genuine concerns.

Turnbull's wisest course would have been to dump the program entirely. However, given his personal far-left stance on such matters, including the homosexual "marriage" campaign, that was never going to happen. Nevertheless, to the public humiliation of not only Birmingham but also his equally complicit predecessor Christopher Pyne, he did significantly correct the program, to Christensen's and his colleagues' satisfaction.

What consequences have these developments had for the national political debate?

Decided on election

Ever since being advanced some weeks ago, it had been clear that proposing Senate voting system changes could only mean Turnbull had decided on a double-dissolution election, almost certainly on July 2 – the first Saturday when such an election could be held within the post-June 30 "window" for such contests. On March 21 he virtually confirmed both points.

Before this much nonsense had been talked and written about the necessary trigger(s) for the Governor-General to grant a double dissolution. Even so, experienced a journalist as *The Australian's*

editor-at-large Paul Kelly had insisted that, without a twice-rejected Australian Building and Construction Commission Bill, Turnbull could not credibly go to Yarralumla with such a request. That is wrong, but in any case the Prime Minister then effectively set about resolving the question by having the Governor-General issue a proclamation under Section 5 of the Constitution reconvening Parliament on April 18 (having prorogued it effective this coming Friday). This will give the Senate ample time to pass the ABCC Bill and its companion, already twice-rejected Registered Organisations Bill. Failure to do so will clearly constitute a "failure to pass".

While the Governor-General has scope to exercise discretion on a "failure to pass" request, past precedent suggests that, should that comprise part of Turnbull's double-dissolution advice, it would be constitutionally prudent for His Excellency to accede to that request and leave it to the High Court to decide the matter later (as it would certainly be asked to do).

Barely mentioned

Mind you, past double-dissolution elections demonstrate that the bills on whose rejection or "failure to pass" they have been based were barely mentioned during the campaign anyway!

As to the Safe Schools backbench revolt, the press gallery chiefly chose to view it through its favourite prism of "Abbott versus Turnbull tensions". But many of those signing Christensen's letter were Liberals who voted for Turnbull last September. In short, the revolt had nothing to do with Tony Abbott, but sprang from a genuine, constituent-inspired revulsion over an infamous government program.

Yes, the incident is evidence that there exist within the parliamentary Liberal Party two "factions": "conservatives" who listen to the people, and "progressives" given to haring off after the latest cause being promoted by the intelligentsia and their media collaborators. And yes, that does mean Turnbull will have a fight on his hands whenever he seeks (as he invariably will) to go down the "progressive" road – just as Abbott did, from Turnbull and others within his cabinet, whenever he sought to go down the alternative road.

The difference is that Abbott drew his authority – before allowing it to be dissipated by, first and foremost, his chief of staff – from the unquestionable fact that he had brought the Coalition back from the electoral grave to which, in 2009, Turnbull had consigned it. By contrast, Turnbull's "authority" rests solely, and in its nature much more precariously, on the fact that last September 14 he had the numbers.

We have now embarked on a long election campaign.

How, after it's over, will those numbers look?

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