

As 2016 election officially ends, next one may not be too far

[Phillip Hudson](#), The Australian, August 8, 2016

Today, Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers will be in Brisbane to hand-deliver the returned election writs to Queensland Governor Paul de Jersey, who is filling in as administrator of the commonwealth while Peter Cosgrove is at the Rio Olympics.

It is the act that officially ends the July 2 election.

But even before Cosgrove returns to open the 45th parliament on August 30, it's becoming clear Malcolm Turnbull will not get the full three-year term he desires.

Turnbull is yet to reach one year as Prime Minister and having just survived a marathon eight-week winter campaign with a wafer-thin majority of one seat, he won't want to think about the next election. However, despite the PM optimistically talking about "the next three years", he could be forced by a series of complex reasons to have the next election in just two years.

Like the election just gone where constitutional hurdles put time limits on options and the government was forced to scramble to bring forward the budget, the next election faces similar issues.

Arcane rules around Senate elections mean the next election must effectively be held between August 2018 and May 2019. However, fixed dates for the two biggest state elections in NSW and Victoria and other factors will severely limit Turnbull's choices within that window.

The most important restriction placed on the Prime Minister is that while the new Senate is still another three weeks away from being sworn in, the Constitution requires another Senate poll be held before July 1, 2019. The clock is already ticking on senators' fixed terms. Only half the senators have a six-year term and the others have three years that expire on June 30, 2019.

As we have just seen, it takes about five weeks to sort, scan and count Senate votes. That means, to be safe, an election by mid-May 2019. Given the minimum 33 days' notice, the poll has to be called around April 1. No fooling.

Such a scenario would also mean having to move the budget — again.

Running an election campaign in April-May would also cut across Easter and school holidays but, most importantly, would come immediately after the NSW state election, which is fixed for Saturday, March 23. A significant factor is that the Coalition could struggle to fund campaigns for a federal poll and the biggest state immediately after each other. More than \$4 million was withheld from the NSW Liberals at the last election because of a disclosure dispute, and the party was so cash-strapped in the federal campaign that Turnbull had to kick in a reported \$2m. It is technically possible for Turnbull to force NSW to move its election date, but it has been locked in for four years. It would be rude and could backfire.

The strongest option is for Turnbull to go before the NSW election, but this is a delicate manoeuvre. Calling an election in early January would annoy people on summer holiday and memories are still raw in Coalition circles of how badly a January election went for Campbell Newman.

The most likely option is for Turnbull to call a March 2 election immediately after Australia Day in 2019 — almost identical to what Paul Keating did in 1996. It would see both the federal and NSW elections held at either end of March.

Some serious fundraising would be needed and Turnbull would require the blessing of Premier Mike Baird, who would enter his formal campaign immediately after the federal poll.

The alternative is for Turnbull to seek re-election in 2018. However, the Victorian state poll is fixed for November 24. It would be messy to choose a date in December that would see two campaigns overlapping.

More restrictions mean the Senate election can't be called before July 1, 2018. After the 33-day wait that means the earliest poll date is Saturday, August 4, 2018. Mindful of the need to avoid footy grand finals, it leaves Turnbull just a handful of Saturdays between August and October.

If Turnbull took this option, the election campaign would be just two years away. It could be the shortest term of parliament since Bob Hawke's early election in 1984.

Not since 2007 has a prime minister survived a full term of parliament, so anything could happen. The government might lose its one-seat majority in the House of Representatives and become a minority government vulnerable to a vote of no confidence.

Or, having called the first double dissolution poll in three decades, Turnbull could do it again.

A wildcard option is to hold the house and Senate elections on different days, as was common before 1970, but this is the most unlikely option.

But before any decision on the next general election, Turnbull may send voters to the polls twice — for a plebiscite on same-sex marriage and a referendum on indigenous recognition in the Constitution. With a state election due next March in Western Australia and a Queensland poll looming, it is becoming a busy time on the hustings. The government is running out of time to comfortably hold the plebiscite this year — if it gets support in parliament to conduct it. But there's also an ambition to hold the indigenous referendum in May. It might not be ready then, and agreeing on the question is shaping up as a battle. But the government must consider how often it wants to be ordering people to polling booths — and the cost.

An estimate, which is now out of date so it will be more expensive, is that it will cost \$160m to hold each "election type event". An option may be to hold both on the same day. The combined cost would be less than \$200m as taxpayers won't have to pay twice for running the election and staff.

Critics may argue it will confuse two important issues, but the most successful day in the dismal history of referendums is May 21, 1977 when four questions were put to voters plus a plebiscite on the national song. Since World War II only five changes to the Constitution out of 25 attempts have been successful. Three of them were on this day.