

Events favour Malcolm Turnbull hanging on for a little time yet

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The Australian

12:00AM December 7, 2017

There are only three certainties in federal politics today.

The first is that if the Liberals replace their leader this side of the federal election, which could be sooner rather than later thanks to the rolling, roiling citizenship saga, they will be signing the government's death warrant.

The second is that those determined to sabotage the government in order to destroy Malcolm Turnbull will continue regardless, partly because they can, partly because this government often gives the impression it has a death wish, and partly because of the number of political missteps, there is no good reason or incentive for them to stop.

The third certainty, to emphasise as of today, is that Bill Shorten remains the man most likely to succeed Turnbull as prime minister. Turnbull has sharpened up but he has to stay sharper without let-up. He has to get out more; then, when he is out and about, he has to have fixed in his head what message it is he wants to transmit, and — while we are at it — stop checking his watch, keep his hands out of his pockets or stop folding them behind his back so they are always ready to shake or hug.

That aside, there is no doubt the Opposition Leader has been left severely compromised this week on two key issues. He has not been subjected to forensic questioning on the Sam Dastyari affair, particularly over reports he used “back channels” to warn Dastyari that ASIO might have concerns about his Chinese benefactor Huang Xiangmo. Shorten's brief response that he did not divulge classified information sounds suspiciously like someone using a technicality to put off follow-up questions of what was passed on to Dastyari, when, why and by whom.

The affair has left Shorten vulnerable on national security, an area Turnbull dominates. Dastyari's position is untenable, and if Shorten fails to take further action the Opposition Leader will be seen as weak or as a man with something to hide.

Then, following his vainglorious boasting that Labor's strict vetting regime meant all his MPs were in the clear, Shorten is looking shifty on citizenship. His strategy to maximise the government's embarrassment as Coalition MPs fell like skittles collapsed spectacularly on Tuesday night, leaving Shorten looking at best a right dill.

These two issues could lead even more voters to conclude that when it comes to the Labor leader, the initials BS stand for much more than his name.

The government could consider keeping parliament sitting for another week to make up for the week it stupidly cancelled. Surely Labor would not object. Incidentally, Attorney-General George Brandis, once a magnet for mishaps, has been a standout performer on national security, citizenship and in the debate on same-sex marriage. Maybe he should stay. Just saying.

Business is also fully alert to the implications for the economy if Shorten is elected.

The government's wish that business would be as active on this front as it was on same-sex marriage could be granted. At the recent boardroom lunch with the Business Council of Australia, Shorten was quizzed by Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce about company tax cuts. Joyce argued that they were essential to maintain a competitive investment environment and boost jobs. Joyce urged Shorten to keep his options open.

Shorten flatly refused, reiterating that Labor would not proceed with them and, despite agreement on some peripheral issues, the lunch ended very unhappily for the business leaders, who are now considering strategies to keep the company tax cuts alive.

Back to the more immediate crisis. Labor first offered up David Feeney, the man who forgot to declare his purchase of a house and now can't find his citizenship papers. Feeney is dead meat. Labor can kiss his seat goodbye. As - reported here last week, Victorian Liberals are threatening to leave seats such as Batman to Labor and the Greens to slug it out — unless Labor plays ball on preferences elsewhere. ACT senator Katy Gallagher succumbed to pressure soon after Feeney. Others will follow.

The notion that Labor could decide who was eligible and who was not was never on. The High Court gets the last word, so all those with questions marks

over their status have to be referred. Labor argues that all its other MPs have taken reasonable steps, claiming this accords with the court's recent rulings. Let's assume that is a correct interpretation, and the scholars are not sure it is. Tasmanian Justine Keay has admitted she deliberately delayed renouncing her British citizenship because she did not think she would win the seat and if she lost she would not be able to get it back. The delay meant she did not get her renunciation by the time nominations closed. Would this High Court consider that reasonable, or excuse the fact others had not acted in a timely fashion? Recent rulings suggest not.

If mainly opposition or crossbench MPs are ineligible, then a super Saturday of by-elections would work. If more government MPs, particularly in marginal seats, are swept up, it won't. In that case the pressure for a general election would be overwhelming. As always, the numbers will dictate.

The day will come when Turnbull will no longer be Prime Minister. The Turnbull haters will rejoice, saying they told us so, ignoring the fact they have told us so many things for so long that one of them will eventually come true. They told us he would be gone by last Christmas. Then they told us he would be gone before his second anniversary. Then they were adamant he would be gone by this Christmas. When it became clear that deadline was unachievable, they resorted to using C and D-grade players such as John Barilaro and George Christensen to try to precipitate a crisis.

After these sordid little conspiracies exploded in all their faces like trick cigars, the group narrative switched to maybe not this Christmas but after that, at some point, definitely, it will all be over. Of course it will. Nothing lasts forever. However, their chances of engineering it before the next election hover at zero.

Little has changed on the leadership front for months. There is no alternative, no candidate, no challenge. A loss in Bennelong would darken the mood, heighten the anxiety and increase the destabilisation and the frustration. A win would boost morale. It would signify the government can win the next election. Not that it would silence the haters.