

## Shorten's on a roll but wise enough to steer clear of hubris

Dennis Shanahan



Bill Shorten with Scott Morrison at Parliament House on Thursday. Picture: Getty Images.

Dennis Shanahan, Political Editor, 11:00PM December 7, 2018

The parliamentary year has ended with a bang, not a whimper, starting an unofficial six-month election campaign for a May vote. Bill Shorten is favoured to win that campaign and become the next prime minister.

Minority government, Liberal losses in Victoria, a Liberal MP's defection, failure to finalise legislation on school discrimination and religious freedom, no result on energy laws, sabotage by Malcolm Turnbull, forced interventions in preselections, vicious factional fights, crushed morale and parliamentary chaos bedevilled and bewildered the Coalition's last legislative sitting of the year.

Scott Morrison, although desperate and isolated at times, has not given up and is determined to grab any opportunity to improve his disastrous position. Out of the ashes of this week the Prime Minister snatched the perennial advantage for the Coalition that Labor can't be trusted on border protection and national security.

The Coalition will campaign hard and fast to reinforce the impression a Labor government would allow "the boats" to start again, with the aim of driving a wedge into the ALP as it prepares for a potentially fraught national conference next weekend.

The Coalition hasn't been able to achieve sufficient positive traction over economic management and Morrison is prepared to use any available negative tactic in the six months he has left. Not since 2013, when Julia Gillard announced the September election date in January, has there been a longer unofficial campaign; and not since John Hewson in 1993 has there been an opposition leader with such strong expectations of being swept into office.

Morrison faces similar challenges to Gillard in 2013: managing a precarious parliamentary minority and a divided government while being undermined by the leader he replaced and facing a tenacious long-term opposition leader.

Like Hewson in 1993, Shorten has a comprehensive policy alternative for government, including radical tax changes, but a high voter dissatisfaction rating in Newspoll.

Perhaps none of this will have a bearing on the election next year, because every election is different, but it demonstrates anything is possible — Gillard didn't survive to the election and Hewson lost the unlosable election to Paul Keating.

The past two weeks of parliament are further proof of the unpredictability of politics and the foundation for Shorten's well-advised belief that Labor can take nothing for granted, that it can't appear to be assuming victory and it can't rely on Turnbull's sabotage to always work in its favour.

Shorten's powerful advantages include: he has been leader for five years; his colleagues are disciplined and accept his leadership; Labor has developed tax and economic policies for government; he's offering fiscal responsibility; the ALP has an energy policy; the ALP is drawing in Greens supporters; there's an overwhelming polling advantage; and the Coalition is in chaos. Shorten's summary of the year yesterday was succinct and contained no hubristic claims about the next election: "Labor has had a positive year. We have been a strong opposition, but I believe we're emerging as an alternative government." The key here is offering "alternative government", not disruptive opposition, and ensuring voters feel no alarm at the "alternative" policies and decide they are a threat to the economy.

So far opposition Treasury spokesman Chris Bowen has balanced voter fears about radical ALP policies on investment by "grandfathering" changes to

negative gearing and capital gains and offering a positive of housing affordability for young people.

The Coalition has failed to exploit concern among investors, particularly retirees, and Shorten and Bowen have talked about economic responsibility and maintaining of the Coalition's projected budget surplus.

Shorten leaves economic arguments in the background as much as possible and prefers to talk about social agendas and consumer interests. In summing up Labor's year, he nominated his campaign for a "national integrity commission to restore the faith of the Australian people in our political process" and the "work Labor's banking royal commission conducted" as the top issues.

He cut short talk about negative gearing and qualified the prospect of continuing budget surpluses when asked if he would go into deficit to fund his programs in government. "We will have a very positive position on surplus over the four years, and a much better position than the Liberals over the 10 years," he said, repeating the mantra of the previous election that conceded Labor had a worse short-term position on debt and deficit than the Coalition.

Of course, he wanted to talk about the government, which "this year has reached peak division". "They have lost a prime minister and a deputy prime minister, a foreign minister. They are racked by division. This government is famous for its cuts and its chaos and its division. It lurches from embarrassment to embarrassment, scandal to scandal, chaos to chaos," he said yesterday.

Despite this, Labor finished the last week of parliament for the year on the back foot over national security and border protection, giving Morrison a reprieve from the dismal Liberal outlook. The Prime Minister was able to declare there would be a budget surplus next year, he changed Liberal leadership rules, intervened to stop a preselection brawl, asserted his authority over Turnbull and avoided an embarrassing defeat on the floor of parliament.

The Liberal Party is in a mess, Morrison is facing defeat and Coalition MPs can't stop ill-disciplined infighting. What's more, the Coalition finished the year unable to pass its "big stick" divestment laws for power companies or agree on amendments to prevent discrimination against school students and ensure

religious freedom. Yet attempts by Labor, independents and the Greens to change offshore processing of asylum-seekers and to amend communication security laws failed spectacularly.

Morrison wanted laws changed to allow police and security agencies to have access to encrypted communications in their task of foiling terrorist plots, criminal acts and pedophile rings. Labor didn't want the laws to go too far, and the Greens and independents wanted to introduce new laws to give doctors say over evacuating asylum-seekers from Nauru and Manus Island.

Without control of the Senate or the house, the Coalition faced embarrassment by failing to deliver the new encryption laws, which Morrison said were essential, by Christmas or by having to accept changes to the way asylum-seekers could be brought to Australia. Morrison overreached on the encryption laws, accusing Labor of being "soft on terror" and starting a game of brinkmanship on national security. Labor blundered in playing its own parliamentary games and linking the encryption laws with the medical evacuation of refugees.

Morrison pounced. As the immigration minister charged with "stopping the boats" after the 2013 election, he was uniquely placed to push the advantage. All the horrific and lurid details of the reality of Labor's policy changes in 2008 — sinking boats, deaths at sea, drowned babies, thousands in detention and \$11 billion in costs — were set against the fact a diminishing handful of children remain in detention.

For years Shorten has resisted pressure within Labor to depart from the border protection policies of John Howard and Tony Abbott and used every opportunity to say there was no difference, that Labor and the Coalition were "joined at the hip" on border protection and national security. On Thursday that changed. Labor now has a "point of difference" with the Coalition. It may go further at the Labor national conference and may be aimed at attracting Liberal voters "for the first time" who are concerned at the length of time people have remained on Nauru.

Shorten is appealing to the compassion of voters — demonstrated in the Wentworth by-election and blue-ribbon Liberal Victorian state seats — over the small number of people, particularly children, held indefinitely in detention. "It is not an automatic correlation that you can only deter people-smugglers by keeping people in indefinite detention — that is not the

Australian way,” he said yesterday as he promised to get people processed more quickly and settled in third countries. (That empty promise has been made by every opposition since a Labor government introduced mandatory detention for boat arrivals in the 1990s.)

Faced with an emboldened left wing in his party because of the parliamentary party’s support for change, Shorten sought to play down the differences and accentuate the common policy to stop deaths at sea: yes, he supported turning back the boats; yes, he supported offshore processing and settlement in third countries; but no, he didn’t want to leave the power of medical evacuation with the minister, although he conceded the government already was “quietly” evacuating children on medical grounds.

Morrison described the stance as “gutting offshore processing” and encouraging people-smugglers to start “selling tickets” because Labor would change the legislation in government.

In the end, facing political damage from blocking security laws, Shorten passed what Labor said were “awful laws” without any concession from the Coalition on border protection.

Shorten and Labor are still well in front, but the last week of parliament is a warning not to take anything for granted.