

Early election adds up for desperate Malcolm Turnbull to save skin, writes Andrew Bolt

March 21, 2016 Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun

FORCING the Governor-General to recall parliament next month shows how desperate Malcolm Turnbull is for the early election he needs to save his skin.

On the day that Newspoll showed his popularity in free fall, the Prime Minister announced parliament would be forced back to sit from April 18.

But he was really announcing the election campaign has now started and will last a dangerously long 15 weeks. Poor you.

Sniffing badly, making him look even shiftier, Turnbull declared three weeks of extra sittings from next month were needed to force the Senate to reconsider two Bills it has blocked that are designed to clean up union corruption and lawlessness.

Malcolm Turnbull holding a press conference in the Prime Ministers Courtyard.

Be clear: these changes are needed. Turnbull has right on his side and finally looks like he has an agenda. He even looked strong.

One Bill brings back the Australian Building and Construction Commission that did so much to crack down on the rogue CFMEU and improve productivity in the building industry.

BLUEPRINT: Budget key to early poll

The second forces union officials to be as accountable as directors of public companies. It is a scandal that Labor and the Greens, along with a couple of feral crossbenchers, have so far blocked these Bills in the Senate.

These two parties are effectively running a protection racket for their union mates and donors, not least the giant CFMEU, which has 100 of its officials and delegates now before the courts.

If the Senate next month blocks the Bills again, Turnbull will have his legal trigger to call a double-dissolution election for July 2 — months early.

So cleaning up crooked unions is an important issue, but how much does it really matter to Turnbull? Is it just an excuse?

Malcolm Turnbull claims the election will be a battle about union reform, but it won't.

Consider: Turnbull has for six months as Prime Minister said little about union lawlessness. He wanted to seem less “confrontational” than former prime minister Tony Abbott.

Worse, the government last week even blocked the Senate from debating the ABCC Bill it now says must be debated in special sittings.

No, Turnbull's real problem is that support for him and his government has been falling over the past six months.

Mr 60 per cent is now Mr 39 per cent in Newspoll, and Labor is back to evens, or thereabout, with the Coalition.

It looked like getting worse the longer Turnbull waited for an election.

The Budget deficit seems to be blowing out again, but Turnbull still has no economic narrative, no tax policy, no new ideas to cut spending and no rapport with the crossbenchers he needs to help get Bills through the Senate. Hence this rush — or marathon — to an early election.

And there almost certainly will be an early election. Turnbull needs the votes of six crossbench senators next month to pass these two union Bills, but is unlikely to get more than four or five.

Independent Senators Jacqui Lambie and Glenn Lazarus. Picture: AAP

A double-dissolution election would actually suit Jacqui Lambie, Nick Xenophon and John Madigan because all senators — not just half — must go to the polls, which means they need only half the normal quota to get re-elected.

The other senators, with less personal support and still four years left to serve if there's no double dissolution, know they're probably gone, yet, even then, Glenn Lazarus seems too bull-headed to buckle.

Turnbull is in fact counting on those Bills to fail again, which is why he also brought forward the Budget by a week to May 3. He does not want to announce a Budget one day and call a July 2 election the next. It would look even trickier.

But it is also dangerous, and it is significant that Treasurer Scott Morrison made very clear that this was Turnbull's call.

See, voters — that's you — will now have an election campaign lasting three times the normal length, with all the drama that they tend to hate.

Moreover, while Turnbull claims the election will be a battle about union reform, it won't.

There's no way he can keep arguing this topic for 15 weeks. People will get bored, and most don't think unions are a big part of their lives anyway. They'll want to talk instead about taxes, spending, handouts, health and education.

That's the danger. The Budget will come in the middle of this de facto election campaign and will probably show a blowout in spending and debt.

There will be little money for tax cuts or other goodies.

Then you'll have two more months before you vote to decide whether this is good enough. If I were a Liberal, I would not been keen to hear your answer.