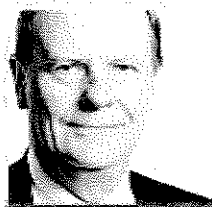


Labor has more to gain if the election is after July



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Kevin Rudd does not want a double dissolution election over his carbon pollution reduction scheme, which is why he is asking the Opposition to come up with proposed amendments. He wants to incorporate any reasonable amendments and get the Coalition to pass the bill.

Rudd knows when energy prices start rising, when food and services cost more as a result of the Government's scheme, the public is going to get tetchy. He wants to be able to say the scheme was bipartisan. He wants to say no one should blame him or Labor for price rises or lost jobs because the Coalition had exactly the same approach and without their support it would never have been introduced.

If Rudd truly wanted a double dissolution, he would not be asking for amendments. He would insist on a take-it-or-leave-it approach. If the Coalition takes it, he gets his model. If it leaves it, he gets his election trigger. But he gets that only if his bill is rejected in its current form. If the Government accepts any amendments, it loses that option.

A government wants as many options as possible and it would not lightly disregard the chance of a double dissolution. But what does it mean in practical terms?

A government can hold an election for the House of Representatives any time. But it can take only half the Senate to an election after July. If a government calls an election for the house in the first half of the year, it will still have to hold a half Senate election – separately – after July. That hasn't happened since 1970.

The Government has the option of a house and half-Senate election in the second half of the year. The double dissolution gives it the option of a house and full-Senate election in the first half of the year. What's the difference? Six months.

In a full-Senate election, the minor parties and independents can get elected on a lower quota. And a full-Senate election on the carbon pollution reduction scheme would elevate the profile of the Greens. They are likely to get the balance of power. The alternative, a half Senate election, is quite attractive to Labor because the majority facing re-election are from the Coalition. The freak result in the 2004 election that produced that outcome cannot be repeated.

There are some in the Coalition who believe it would be a major advantage to force the Government to wait for an election until after the budget in May. The thinking is that the Government will be damaged because next year's budget will be a shocker.

Really? The midyear budget review due in November will revise the growth forecast upwards and revise unemployment down. It will show an improving bottom line. Having established very pessimistic figures in the public's mind about deficit and debt, by the time of next year's budget, the Government will be able to show things to be better than expected. It is coming off low expectations. It will argue things are turning up – getting better not worse. Far from rushing off to a poll to beat the budget, Rudd may well be counselled to wait for it.

Coalition members in marginal seats may feel they are not ready for a poll in February and they may relish

the chance of an extra six months to prepare their campaigns. But they must take into account that their opponents will use the extra time as well. Remember, it is the difference between the two candidates that counts in an election, not the stand-alone position of each.

When Senator Reg Withers ran opposition to the Whitlam government, Whitlam called a double dissolution election in 1974 and he won. Withers was unrepentant. Oppositions want elections, he said; they need them. He began working on another. Only an election can turn an opposition into a government. When the Opposition looks at the carbon pollution reduction scheme it should not be motivated by the risks or the bluster about a double dissolution. It should ask itself one overriding question: is the legislation good or is it bad? If it is good it should be passed or passed with improvements. If not, it should be defeated. There is no principle in voting for bad legislation just to move an election six months one way or another. The public will not be impressed by that.

And the Government should think carefully about running off to an early election. The public will see it as opportunism. Few governments do better in such circumstances. The public wants to hear reasons for or against the legislation. It wants to know how it will affect them. It is not interested in politicians using major changes to our economy for their own tactical political advantage.

Peter Costello is the member for Higgins and a former federal treasurer.

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