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Page 1 of 2

CONROY AND WONG LEAD THE CHARGE AS LABOR GOES TO WAR WITH ITSELF

*Proposed electoral system changes have
drawn support, except from ALP senators*

NIKI SAVVA



Fears that a proposed new voting system has the potential to entrench Coalition dominance of the Senate have created a deep split inside Labor.

The Senate Opposition Leader, Penny Wong, and her deputy, Stephen Conroy, strongly backed by powerbroker Sam Dastyari, have told Bill Shorten they will not support changes recommended by an all-party committee last year that

would eliminate group ticket voting and introduce optional preferential voting above the line in Senate elections.

It has created a clear divide between them and their lower house colleagues who remain strongly supportive of the changes recommended in the highly regarded report of the committee chaired by government backbencher Tony Smith released a year ago.

If the senators succeed in forcing Shorten to oppose the changes, the government will have to rely on the Greens to get the changes through.

Conroy and Wong have sought to persuade the Greens to drop their support. So far they have resisted. Talk of an early election with the new rules in place has stirred the conflict, compelling Dastyari to go public.

"Frankly I can't find a single Labor senator that supports any of this," he told *The Australian*. "It would be complete madness for Labor to support any proposal that

would risk forever preventing a progressive Senate. I can't see Labor doing that."

Dastyari argued that while the Greens would benefit in the short term, long term it would make them "irrelevant".

"If the Greens want to sign their own suicide note and do a deal with the Liberals, good luck to them," Dastyari said. "Let's see them explain to their supporters why they are prepared to give up control of the Senate for their own jobs."

However, Greens spokeswoman Lee Rhiannon, a member of the committee, insists they will vote for the legislation even if Labor does not — providing it mirrors the recommendations of the committee she put her name to — given the party's support over many years for the measures.

"Our vote is determined not on what the Coalition is doing or what Labor is doing, but we hope they would do the right thing."

"We vote according to our policy and our principles. We see no reason why we would change," Rhiannon told *The Australian*, pointing out the proposals mirrored changes made in NSW more than a decade ago.

When Smith released the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters after so-called preference whisperers had so gamed the existing system that Ricky Muir from the Motorist Enthusiast Party became a senator with less than 1 per cent of the primary vote (roughly 17,000 votes), it seemed like a slam dunk.

The committee's deputy chairman, Labor backbencher Alan Griffin, stood beside Smith and spoke in support.

In his submission Labor's national secretary, George Wright,

had backed the changes.

Griffin, who has a reputation for being good with numbers, remains solidly behind change, as does Gary Gray, the shadow special minister of state, who likewise is good with numbers.

On budget day Smith tabled another report dealing with the debacle that was the West Australian Senate election when more than 1000 votes disappeared and that forced a \$21 million rerun.

Gray seized the opportunity to urge the government to press ahead with changes to Senate voting, warning that if it did not, "it would be a travesty for Australian democracy if these careful and thought through reforms were not in place in time for the next federal election".

Gray told the house: "These reforms will significantly strengthen

our democratic process by reducing the capacity for manipulation and increasing transparency in our electoral system which, despite these concerns, still remains among the most stable and effective in the world."

While Labor's Senate leaders remain supremely confident they could better negotiate with micro parties or independents, their lower house MPs worry the system could be gamed so comprehensively in future that even a joint sitting in the wake of a double-dissolution election might not guarantee passage of disputed legislation.

The government is playing a strategic game with the legislation because it is worried that once introduced, it would make negotiations with crossbenchers on other matters even more difficult than they are now.

However, it cannot wait until the last minute. It's not as simple as the Prime Minister introducing

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the legislation one day, having it passed the next, then immediately calling an election with the new system in place. Voila. Micros gone and a more workable Senate in place.

This supposes that the Australian Electoral Commission would have the mechanisms in place to handle changes to the voting system. Given the problems experienced in the 2013 election, this seems highly unlikely.

At present the Prime Minister must give a minimum 33 days notice for an election.

Presumably the AEC would need considerably more time than that to update as well as road-test its software, train its staff and educate the public.

How much time it needs hopefully will be made clearer tonight when the AEC appears before Senate estimates.

Also, micros have a habit of becoming macros. The Greens are proof of that.

Views differ on who would benefit, or the point is dismissed as irrelevant.

The ABC's election expert, Antony Green, has written that if the new system had been in place at the 2013 election, the Liberals in Victoria — not Muir — would have picked up the third spot, they also would have picked up the third spot in Tasmania rather than Jacqui Lambie, and in South Australia Labor would have gained an extra seat, as would Nick Xenophon at the expense of the Greens and Family First.

As for claims it could entrench a Coalition-Green partnership, Liberals say it could just as easily be a Labor-Green partnership — something else Labor definitely would not welcome.

Ultimately, the objective should be a better voting system, or as Smith says: "There is nothing more democratic than giving voters the full power to decide their own preferences."