



Libs seek to tweak Labor IR

By Andrew Fraser

Coalition senators will use this week's hearings of the Senate Industrial Relations Committee to press for extending the life of the Labor Government's replacement for Australian Workplace Agreements.

Deputy committee chair John Watson, a Liberal from Tasmania, and Mathias Cormann, a WA Liberal, flagged yesterday that they would explore the greater use of individual statutory contracts as the committee tours the nation over the next seven days.

The final shape of Coalition policy on industrial relations remains unclear after the electorate's rejection of the Howard government's WorkChoices regime on November 24.

Opposition spokeswoman on

workplace relations Julie Bishop has flagged amendments to extend the operation of Labor's Individual Transitional Employment Agreements beyond the cut-off date for signing of December 31, 2009.

The amendments aim at allowing the agreements to run for five years, potentially extending them beyond the next two elections. But the Government's Workplace Relations Amendment (Transition to Forward with Fairness) Bill 2008 allows for only two years for the transitional agreements.

Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson has said the Coalition, which holds a Senate majority until June 30, will not block Labor's Bill, if the House of Representatives rejects the Coalition's amendments, as it certainly will.

Labor used its numbers on the Senate committee to bring forward the reporting date from April 28 to March 17 – the start of the second week of Parliament's next sitting fortnight. This would allow the Bill to be through Parliament before Easter.

Senator Watson has pledged "a thorough and rigorous investigation" at this week's hearings, in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne.

"There's no doubt about it. AWAs did provide a degree of flexibility that business found pretty useful, without really denying opportunities for top wages," he said yesterday.

There remained "a little bit of disappointment" in Coalition ranks with the leadership's decision to so quickly walk away from AWAs, the mainstay of the WorkChoices regime, which Dr Nelson has declared "dead".