



## Victorian Liberal Party in no hurry to rush to federal election

Victorian Liberal MP Kelly O'Dwyer. Picture: AAP

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The Victorian Liberal Party is expecting a 2019 federal election and is not aiming to finish preselections until March, greatly reducing the chances of Malcolm Turnbull rushing to the polls this year.

The party's federal seats standing committee is backing a late election timetable, confirming 2019 as odds-on for a poll. This is despite the apparent improvement in the Turnbull government's standing and challenges faced by Bill Shorten over his position on the business sector. The Liberals' administrative committee was due to debate preselection timetables last night, including the potential for as many as six sitting MPs to face preselection challenges, including Revenue and Financial Services Minister Kelly O'Dwyer.

The party's conservative forces were pushing for preselections to be decided by the committee, which would preclude challenges to Ms O'Dwyer, former minister Kevin Andrews, high-profile MP Tim Wilson, backbencher Sarah Henderson and two others. Senior Liberals told The Australian this week the Coalition was not ready to fight an early poll. This was partly due to the expectation Mr Turnbull would struggle to win and would want to hold on to office for as long as possible.

The standing committee was explicit in its views on an early poll, declaring: "The federal election is unlikely to occur until 2019. The last date for a federal election to be held is 18 May, 2019. Nominations for candidates would then likely close one month before the election date. An aim should be to complete all federal preselections by March 2019 at the latest." The standing committee report comes amid attempts to prevent sitting members from being challenged in preselections after MPs in 14 seats renominated.

An olive branch was extended to the sitting MPs despite protracted infighting between the party's conservative and moderate wings. The preselection timetable is complicated by the November 24 Victorian election and the recent redrawing of some boundaries, with the new borders yet to come into force. This severely complicates the way preselections can be conducted. The Liberals have earmarked as priorities five Labor seats and an independent, suggesting that preselection processes for these seats should start immediately.

The Labor seats are Hotham (4.2 per cent margin), MacNamara (formerly Melbourne Ports, 1.2 per cent), Bendigo (3.9 per cent) and Isaacs (3 per cent). The independent seat of Indi (4.9 per cent), formerly held by Liberal frontbencher Sophie Mirabella, could be contested by her husband, Greg Mirabella, with the family having "stitched up" the seat, according to locals familiar with the contest. The committee found there were real risks in conducting preselections before the state poll.

"The major risk in conducting preselections before the conclusion of the state election is disruption to the state election campaign, including volunteers, key campaign personnel and candidates being distracted from campaigning and focusing on running as candidates, supporting candidates or being delegates in preselections," the federal seats standing committee found. "The major risk in delaying the opening of preselections is that candidates will not be preselected before the close of nominations for the federal election. These risks must be seriously considered and weighed up in terms of formulating a timetable for preselections."

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