

Victorian Liberal infighting threatens to derail election campaign

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Conservative Victorian Liberals have been accused of plotting to derail the party's federal election campaign by petitioning for an urgent meeting to discuss a lack of preparedness for the federal poll. The Victorian branch is now facing more internal strife as conservative members prepare to wage war on the party's internal decision-making body – the administrative committee. Victoria's most senior Liberal, Josh Frydenberg, may be forced to intervene to stave off a factional implosion and stop the rogue petition which, its backers say, has attracted enough support to trigger a meeting of the 1500-member state council. The latest stoush threatens to become another potentially damaging distraction with a federal election now less than 100 days away.

The petition seen by *The Age* attacks the administrative committee's preparation for the federal election campaign and calls out what the conservative bloc believes is dysfunction among party officials. "The object ... is to address the Victorian division's preparedness, or lack thereof, for the 2019 federal election campaign in Victoria," the petition reads. The conservative grouping wants a specially convened state council meeting to address: "in particular, dysfunction at administrative committee level where it may have a deleterious effect on the federal election campaign in Victoria, and any related matters."

Liberal state council meetings are crucial to the party's internal machinations. They are usually held in March or April and have the power to appoint members to internal leadership positions, including the party president and treasurer. Branch official Fred Ackerman is believed to have spearheaded the petition, along with party members which are aligned with the party's former state president Michael Kroger. But party members across the factional divide say Mr Kroger himself does not support the petition. Mr Ackerman declined to comment. Opponents across the party have criticised the petition for its timing, saying it will hobble election efforts by diverting cash and party resources away from the campaign. Victorian Liberal director Simon Frost said the petition had not been submitted to the party's administrative wing.

The internal spat is the latest development to rock the party. Mr Kroger quit his post last year after the Liberals' thumping state election loss. In recent years the party has run into financial problems, including the theft of almost \$1.5 million by former state director Damien Mantach and a legal stoush with its main donor, which has since been resolved, allowing donations to continue. The party also recently sold its long-held CBD headquarters at 104 Exhibition Street for more than \$37 million. Members of the administrative committee have said they suspect the petition is an attempt to stall an investigation into former vice-presidents Marcus Bastiaan and Paul Mitchell, who were outed in December for allegedly using racist and homophobic slurs in texts and Facebook messages to refer to party members.

Mr Bastiaan and Mr Mitchell both denied they were behind the messages, claiming they were victims of stolen identity and the messages were sent from their phones by other people. The party's state administrative committee voted in January to conduct a forensic investigation into the message exchanges. But the subject of the investigation has become a fraught issue in the past three weeks, since members were told it could cost as much as \$30,000. The petition's circulation comes after conservatives failed to install their pick as the party's country vice-president on the administrative committee, which had two vacancies. However, they did succeed in electing their preferred candidate, John O'Connell, as the party treasurer. One senior Liberal said the group pushing the petition had "spat the dummy" because conservative forces no longer controlled the party's administrative committee. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg did not return calls ahead of publication.

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