

Liberal rebel Dean Smith to fight party decision not to contest Perth byelection

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Liberal backbench senator Dean Smith will challenge on Saturday his party's decision not to field a candidate in the byelection for the federal seat of Perth.

In the coming multiple [byelections](#), the Liberals have decided to stay out of the two Western Australian seats – the other is Fremantle - while they will contest the other three – Mayo in South Australia, Braddon in Tasmania and Longman in Queensland.

Four of the five seats are held by Labor; the Centre Alliance's Rebekha Sharkie holds Mayo.

The WA Liberals don't want to spend the money on what they regard as the unwinnable WA seats; they are also concerned a bad vote would reflect adversely on Malcolm Turnbull.

The decision not to contest was taken by the Liberal state executive but Smith said the issue should be discussed by a broader group. He would take it to the party's state council on Saturday.

He said politics was about consistency, conviction and momentum. "Against every one of those measurements, we fail by not contesting in the Perth by-election," he said.

Fremantle is on a 7.5% margin; Perth is much closer – 3.3%. Also, Perth is unlike the other byelections, in which the former members, who all resigned in the citizenship saga, are re-contesting.

Perth's former member, Tim Hammond quit parliament for family reasons so there is no "incumbent" seeking re-election. Labor is running Patrick Gorman, a one-time adviser to Kevin Rudd, who has most recently been ALP state secretary in WA.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: 'Super Saturday' voters get first say on tax*](#)

Smith told Sky that on the basis of the previous votes, by not running candidates the Liberals forfeited in public funding about A\$90,000 in each of the two seats. "That's money that goes into the coffers of the Labor party and Greens", he said.

Smith is known for his forthrightness. He was one of the group that forced the question of same sex marriage back onto the government's agenda, leading to the successful move to legislate last year.

The Speaker, Tony Smith, told parliament on Monday that changes to the nomination process were delaying the issue of writs for the byelections.

"The earliest possible date for the by-elections is 23 June if the writs are issued today. However, the Electoral Commissioner has advised me that, in light of issues to do with section 44 of the Constitution that have caused four of the five by-elections, the government is considering urgent changes, through regulations, to the nomination process to ensure that candidates are aware of their obligations under section 44 prior to the by-elections taking place." The Commissioner supported these changes, Smith said.

The Speaker said he would continue to consult with the Commissioner and party leaders about the timing and hoped to be able to give an update later in the week.

The delay in announcing the date of what will be a "Super Saturday" has brought some criticism, and suspicion that the government is delaying the byelections to try to disadvantage Labor, which faces struggles in Longman and Braddon.

The ALP national conference is in late July and the run up to it is likely to see increased public debate over what will be controversial issues at it, especially the fate of refugees and asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru. The later the byelections, the more likely the campaigning could

be affected by internal Labor bickering.

In her maiden speech on Monday the new ALP member for Batman, Ged Kearney, signalled she would fight for a softer policy on refugees.

“My commitment in this house is to the cause of humane refugee policy,” she said.

“We must - as a priority - move the asylum seekers off Manus and Nauru to permanent resettlement, and ensure that indefinite detention never happens again.”

She said she could not comprehend “how a nation that provided a safe home to so many in the wake of World War 2 – including our large Jewish community of Holocaust survivors - allowed the Tampa and the ‘children overboard’ scandal to evolve into the shameful policy of indefinite detention on Manus and Nauru.

"Racist dogwhilsting has demonised and vilified a community that has everything to give to Australia - and the sacrifice of this human potential has been made solely for political gain.”

Kearney said “the overwhelming majority of asylum seekers are from places of conflict. And the overwhelming majority have been assessed as refugees under the International Conventions to which Australia is a signatory.

"We are a rich country. We can afford to take more refugees.

"I doubt, however, we can afford the ongoing cost to our national psyche of subjecting men, women and children to years of punitive, indefinite detention.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company

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