

Many voters mightn't thank Scott Morrison for confirming he plans to run the election date out to May. Given Canberra politics is so dysfunctional, it feels like prolonging the agony.

With the widespread assumption that the Coalition can't recover, the early months of 2019 will be something of a hiatus - various stakeholders will put decisions on hold because they expect a change of government.

Morrison's strategy is clear. Play on the best thing he has going for him – a strong economy, which is flowing through to government revenue. Release a budget update on December 17 that shows a healthy bottom line, and probably contains some substantive decisions. Then the April 2 budget can be loaded with voter bait, and contain the long-awaited surplus, opening the way for the poll on May 11 or 18.

The budget update will come out during the ALP's national conference. Usually the Coalition would have avoided a clash, expecting that conference, which determines a supposedly-binding platform, would see Labor divisions on display.

But while issues like refugees, Palestine, industrial relations and trade may stir vigorous debate, the Liberals know they won't get much grist for their purposes. As one Labor man says, the "government" faction at the conference will be large – those with eyes firmly on seeing Bill Shorten reach The Lodge.

By setting out his timetable this week, Morrison has given away the option of a March poll. Unwise to abandon the flexibility, one might say. But March had always been unpopular with the Feds because they didn't want to be the first government on whom NSW voters vent their rage (the state election is late March).

Morrison is no doubt also operating on the basis that the longer he waits the greater the possibility of something turning up.

The government hopes that with maximum time it can turn the political debate onto the economic argument, as well as looking to its fear campaign against Labor to have more impact.

But governments can't rely on being rewarded for favourable numbers. Voters expect them to deliver on the economy. Even with a bright macro picture, they are out of sorts because of low wage growth, cost of living pressures and the general disgruntlement that permeates the modern electorate.

Making the budget the election launch pad has its risks. The 2016 precedent is not encouraging, even if Turnbull's bad campaigning has to take a good deal of blame. A budget can contain unanticipated land mines, and it is awkward if they explode during the campaign – which of course next time will be much shorter than Turnbull's marathon.

Read more: [Liberal Julia Banks defects to crossbench as Scott Morrison confirms election in May](#)

Now in minority government, the Coalition is minimising its parliamentary exposure, proposing only some 10 days of sitting next year before the election. When the houses aren't in session the Senate can't cause trouble and the newly-empowered lower house crossbenchers lose their clout.

But the Senate this week made sure that it will have time for estimate committees to scrutinise (albeit briefly) budget measures, by voting to alter the sitting timetable. Labor recalls that just before the 2016 election it [extracted](#), via the estimates process, the long term costing for the government's company tax cut plan.

With the arrival of Kerry Phelps in parliament on Monday, and then Tuesday's defection of Julia Banks, the House of Representatives crossbench has become the centre of attention. We're yet to see just what tangible results this will produce for Labor or for the crossbenchers themselves.

Labor is trying to muster the numbers to refer Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton's eligibility to the High Court but hasn't locked them in so far. Tasmanian independent Andrew Wilkie on Thursday suggested he'd like to see several referrals together.

The crossbenchers have agendas, including the push for an anti-corruption body and Phelps' bill facilitating medical transfers from Nauru and Manus Island. It's a matter of what they can "land" with the opportunities and time available.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: Day One of minority government sees battle over national integrity commission*](#)

Government legislation such as that giving itself the power to break up recalcitrant energy companies (to be introduced next week) will both test the House crossbenchers and give them openings to pursue their issues.

When on Thursday Labor tried to suspend standing orders to move a motion condemning the government on multiple fronts, the crossbenchers went in all directions.

Wilkie and the Greens' Adam Bandt supported Labor; Bob Katter voted with the government; the women - Cathy McGowan, Rebekha Sharkie, Phelps and Banks abstained. The vote was lost 66-68.

Within the expanded crossbench, the four women have formed a defacto mutually-supportive subgroup. Phelps has confirmed she counselled Banks before she defected. "Julia reached out to me for some consultation about what that process might look and feel like, and I indicated that I would be there to support her in that transition," Phelps said.

While the Liberals are losing out politically because of their low female representation and their

Grattan on Friday: Crossbench women give Morrison a break after week from hell

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

inability to properly address that problem, on the House crossbench the women are now standouts (and a majority).

On Thursday they came to Morrison's rescue. If three of the four had voted with the opposition, the Labor motion would have received a simple majority.

It would not have achieved the absolute majority needed to suspend standing orders, but losing on the straight numbers would have been very embarrassing for the Prime Minister, a symbol of his government's new, diminished status.

Sharkie later explained that "we abstain on what we see as party political games", though adding that she wasn't disputing there were facts in some of the points in the motion.

Labor believed the four had missed an opportunity to deliver a soft blow to the government. Looked at another way, the women may have banked some credit with the government for other things.

As he left for his weekend at the G20 in Argentina, the action – or inaction – of the four female crossbenchers gave Morrison a small salve to apply to the black eye he received earlier in the week from one of their number.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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