

Coalition's wariness signals slow run-up to next election

The Australian, December 22, 2015 12:00AM, David Crowe, Political correspondent

The federal government's wary approach to workplace reform shows how reluctant it is to fight for change.

It also shows how unready it is to fight an election.

Rather than use the Productivity Commission's report to make the case for "repair" of the system, the government uses it to buy more time. This is further proof that Malcolm Turnbull wants to move slowly to the next election, facing voters in spring as his first preference rather than calling a double dissolution for an April poll.

An early election is impossible if the government has not made up its mind on industrial relations reform, where it faces a Labor scare campaign no matter what it does. Employment Minister Michaelia Cash talks of holding "roundtables" early next year to canvass the views of employers, unions and community groups on the commission's final report, stretching the talks over the "coming months". This is an exercise in futility. The government already knows the views of the key interest groups. It also knows there is no chance of a settlement between the warring parties when the union movement has every incentive to campaign at the ballot box rather than to negotiate a compromise.

The future of workplace relations will be decided at an election, not a roundtable.

Turnbull continues to add options to his agenda. All ideas are on the table in tax reform and now everything in the Productivity Commission report is being considered. The choices must be narrowed soon.

The call to bring Sunday penalty rates into line with Saturday rates, at least in some industries, is exactly what Coalition MPs have been calling for over the past two years. They want the rules relaxed — and, yes, pay rates reduced if necessary — to help small employers stay open on weekends.

The Coalition backbench has also been asking for greater scope for individual agreements and tougher penalties for unions that break the law, two other ideas from the commission that cabinet ministers might want to adopt.

Yet Turnbull is a blank canvas on industrial relations. Unlike Tony Abbott, he has no experience in the portfolio and no record of advocating reform. Will he risk pushing for change when even Abbott would not do so?

At a time when conservative MPs remain sceptical about their new leader, workplace reform will be a test of Turnbull's fundamental beliefs and his capacity to campaign for change. He has the political capital. Does he have the conviction to use it?