

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton was dispatched on Tuesday night to announce there'd been unanimous support for Tony Abbott in cabinet, which is meeting for two days.

"That's a strong message, not only to the backbench but to the public as well," Dutton said.

Sources say there was a general discussion; everyone had an opportunity to speak; no one suggested a change in leadership.

Of course not. But it's not hard to guess some of their thoughts. Those of Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop must turn to the golden prize; Treasurer Joe Hockey knows that if Abbott were to fall he would be toast; others wonder whether a new leader would promote or demote them.

That Abbott needed such a demonstration shows how quickly his leadership is apparently unravelling, as backbenchers go public calling for an early resolution of the crisis.

That the message about cabinet support was delivered by Dutton rather than, more appropriately one would think, by deputy Liberal leader Bishop says something in itself.

It had taken most of the day for Bishop to issue a statement saying she wouldn't challenge Abbott, after Sky's early morning report that in a private meeting on Sunday, Abbott sought that assurance and Bishop refused to give it.

The damaging leak had an embattled Prime Minister peppered with questions he would not answer.

Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane called on both Turnbull and Bishop to give public undertakings they won't challenge. But the pressure was on Bishop, because Macfarlane said he'd had a private assurance from Turnbull.

After delivering a guarantee at cabinet on Tuesday afternoon, Bishop said in a statement: “I am not campaigning for the job of Prime Minister, I am not ringing the backbench asking for support. I am not counting any numbers, I will not challenge the leader.”

Bishop’s affirmations of support in the last few days have a certain frosty coating, a reminder of the tensions between her and Abbott’s office, in particular chief of staff Peta Credlin, which were exposed late last year.

If the leadership comes to a crunch at some point, any “no challenge” promises become meaningless. The circus would have well and truly moved on.

The position of Bishop would be interesting. While both she and Turnbull are seen as potential replacements, there’s a lot of talk that a logical line up would be Turnbull as leader and Scott Morrison as treasurer, with Bishop staying in her present positions of deputy Liberal leader and Foreign Minister.

But what would Bishop think?

She’d know she has considerable support in the party, though how much is impossible to judge at this point.

She could look her [Tuesday’s Essential poll](#) rating of 21% as best Liberal leader, only marginally behind Turnbull’s 24% and up from 4% in June last year (Abbott is on 11%). Among Coalition voters she is on 26%, compared with Turnbull’s 24%.

She could reflect that she’s only a couple of years younger than the 60-year-old Turnbull. If she wants to be Prime Minister, this would likely be her only chance. And it would surely be tempting to pitch for the history books as Australia’s first Liberal female PM.

For those with bad memories of Turnbull or ideological objections to him, Bishop would be an

attractive candidate, leaving him to be her treasurer. Bishop, who flunked as shadow treasurer, would not seek the treasury job under Turnbull.

Whether Bishop put up her hand would mainly depend on what her colleagues said about her support and that of Turnbull.

But there is a lot of pain for the party to go through before it gets to any of that, if it does.

In leadership crises, dropping the match often falls to the sort of person who doesn't shy away from a bit of arson. One such is West Australian Liberal Dennis Jensen, who [on Tuesday night called](#) for a vote next week, saying Abbott's leadership was terminal and the issue needed to be lanced quickly. The ABC reported a former whip, Warren Entsch, saying he'd seek a resolution at the party room next week.

Dutton [told the ABC's 7.30](#) : "If people are going out to sabotage this PM, then it really has all the hallmarks of the worst period presided over by Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd". Indeed.

But there's momentum now, even if the end point is up in the air. An insignificant act of madness – Philip's knighthood – started the crisis for Abbott, and fringe players are the ones putting their names to what's happening. Behind the unlikely facade, however, the mutiny is driven by very solid forces - the government's deep unpopularity and the mounting evidence Abbott won't be able to do anything about that.

Before the calls for a vote, Abbott said on Tuesday he would not initiate a spill. Abbott's options are to do nothing, putting the onus on the critics to make a move if they dare, or to find some way to pre-empt them.

Would the crisis coming to a head early give him his best chance or is delay in his interests? Or can't he save himself under any circumstances?

Cabinet ministers back Abbott while they wonder how events might change their fortunes

Written by The Conversation

Tuesday's last word should go to Nationals MP Darren Chester who tweeted: "It's days like these when it becomes self evident to journos who ask me: 'so why did you join the National Party?'"

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