

The ministerial future of Stuart Robert looks very precarious, raising the prospect that Malcolm Turnbull's reshuffle may be wider than has been expected.

In a painful Question Time performance, Robert – who holds the human services and veterans affairs portfolios – refused to be drawn about his 2014 “private” visit to China, when he attended a ceremony with his friend Paul Marks, whose Nimrod Resources was signing an agreement with the Chinese company Minmetals Exploration & Development related to a joint venture for mineral exploration in outback NSW. Marks has been a big donor to the Liberals.

Robert, assistant defence minister at the time, had obtained leave from the Prime Minister's Office for the China trip, which he made on his way to an official visit to Singapore.

While he says the trip was a private one, the Chinese certainly treated him as if he was representing the government, making that clear in a company press release on the ceremony, where his remarks were described as being made “on behalf of the Department of Defence”.

Then there was the statement on a Chinese government website. “On the morning of the 19/8/2014, the Vice Minister of Land and Resources Wang Min met with Australia's Assistant Secretary for Defence Stuart Robert. The two sides agreed to foster a more favourable investment environment and more cooperation between mining companies ...

“Stuart Robert said the Australian government welcomes Chinese company investment in mining exploration and development in Australia. He said that China Minmetals Corporation and Nimrod Resources have set up a joint technical committee, the sign of a new beginning. He is glad that the Ministry and Geological Survey Bureau officials, people from the China Minmetals Corporation and Australia Nimrod Resources attended the meeting today.”

Turnbull has asked his departmental secretary Martin Parkinson to advise on whether Robert has breached the ministerial code of conduct. That says: “A minister shall not act as a consultant or adviser to any company, business, or other interests, whether paid or unpaid, or provide assistance to any such body, except as may be appropriate in their official capacity as minister.”

If Stuart Robert falls, Turnbull has more room for innovation in his reshuffle

Written by The Conversation USA

One would expect Parkinson to have that advice back to Turnbull ASAP. The government needs to deal with the issue quickly and there is no reason to delay. The facts are pretty clear.

The opposition – in particular Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus – has done well in pursuing the matter in parliament. It is a repeat of Labor's performance when it went after Mal Brough over his role in the Ashby affair. At Christmas, Brough stood aside pending completion of the police investigation into his conduct.

In each case the parliamentary quest was complicated, because the issues did not go to responsibilities within the minister's portfolio. The opposition was helped on Tuesday when Speaker Tony Smith took a liberal view of what could be asked of Robert. While Robert revealed nothing, his stonewalling was in itself damaging.

Turnbull presumably will go with whatever Parkinson advises. If he loses Robert it will be embarrassing, but not a disaster.

It would be seen publicly as Turnbull upholding standards, although internally there are always some costs in dumping ministers in trouble.

Robert, a conservative in the party, is hardly a household name. He is close to Treasurer Scott Morrison, who on Monday dismissed the proposition that Robert had been lending his prestige to a business mate as "an offensive suggestion". In September's leadership contest Robert, like other key Morrison supporters, was a vote for Turnbull, while Morrison himself made much of voting for Tony Abbott.

Robert's fall would give Turnbull more opportunity to get fresh talent into the ministry, and provide greater flexibility in the reshuffle.

That reshuffle is waiting for Nationals leader Warren Truss to announce his future. On his present timetable Truss is expected to do so next month, and to say he will step down as his party's leader and quit parliament at the election.

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Turnbull has to replace former cities minister Jamie Briggs, who resigned from the ministry over inappropriate behaviour while overseas. The situation of Brough is more difficult because he has stood aside rather than resigned from the ministry.

But Turnbull should not leave Brough's ministerial spot open. No-one knows how long it will take for the police to finish their inquiry. Given the election is now getting relatively close, it would surely be sensible for Turnbull to make a permanent appointment to fill the frontbench slot with the undertaking that if Brough is cleared, he would be restored when a vacancy occurred.

Barring the unexpected, the reshuffle will be the last chance for changes before the election. Turnbull should make the most of it.

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