

## Abbott-Turnbull conflict goes nuclear

Written by The Conversation USA

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It's ON between Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull – the political equivalent of nuclear war.

Escalating hostilities have come to a spectacular head over Wednesday's story in The Australian. It reported the Turnbull government's defence white paper had [delayed the acquisition of new submarines](#) compared with the draft produced under Abbott, with the former prime minister saying he was "flabbergasted at this decision".

The story, by The Australian's foreign editor Greg Sheridan, quoted from sections of a draft of the white paper from Abbott's time. The draft was a classified national security committee (NSC) document. (When Abbott was prime minister the Turnbull forces often accused the then prime minister's office of leaking NSC documents.)

Responding to a question from Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, Turnbull announced that the secretary of the Defence Department, Dennis Richardson, had asked the Australian Federal Police to investigate the leak.

Shortly before, Turnbull, Defence Minister Marise Payne, Richardson and the head of the Australian Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin, had met in Turnbull's office to discuss the leak. It was agreed the police should be called in.

The Australian story referred to the public statement from then-defence minister Kevin Andrews a year ago that it would be necessary for the first submarine to be built by the mid-2020s. The draft white paper had "the first submarines likely to begin entering service in the late 2020s", Sheridan wrote. Despite the caution in the draft, Abbott and Andrews were determined to get the first submarine built by 2026-27, the report said.

In parliament Turnbull also took aim at the Abbott timetable. He said Richardson and Binskin had advised him and Payne that the advice to the government since 2013 "has been that it was highly unlikely the first of the future submarines could be delivered by 2026".

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The day before The Australian's story appeared Binskin was asked, at a briefing for journalists on the white paper, whether its reference to the early 2030s had changed since the switch of minister and prime minister. He said: "No, no, not at all. No."

Binskin said extra time was needed because the process of selecting, designing and building the new submarines could not be rushed.

Sources confirm that Abbott when prime minister was set on the 2026 date but this had been regarded as unrealistic and was against all professional advice.

Industry Minister Christopher Pyne said that "whatever happened between the draft and the final document would have happened on the basis of the advice from Defence".

Abbott denied having leaked the document. "I don't leak, I don't background against colleagues. If I've got something to say, I say it." But he stood by his comments about the delay. Sheridan also denied Abbott was the source.

On the precedents, as all the players know, there would seem zip chance that the origin of this leak will be traced. It looks so obviously political that finding it could make things worse.

The subs story follows Abbott's Tuesday high-profile partyroom intervention in the tax debate, when he warned against changes, especially to negative gearing, and said there should be a fresh effort to cut spending.

One close-in observer says: "Today's story has nothing to do with submarines – it has everything to do with Abbott turning into Rudd".

A Liberal MP sees him as motivated by hatred of Turnbull and going "full bore" to try to destroy the man who destroyed him. "This guy is going to blow up the place," he says. Another Liberal parliamentarian describes Abbott's latest action as a "huge strategic blunder" by the former

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leader.

The question now is how far Abbott is willing to go in his attacks on Turnbull – whether this has turned into a crusade for which the government will pay an increasingly high price in an election year. The cost to Abbott will also spiral if he persists – but what frightens some Liberals is that he may not care.

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