

Brendan Nelson declares Kevin Rudd is 'tailor made' for United Nations secretary-general job

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Brendan Nelson, a former Liberal leader who was appointed an ambassador by Kevin Rudd, has strongly backed the former prime minister's request for the government to nominate him for the United Nations secretary-general post.

After playing his elaborate but transparent game – pretending he wasn't a candidate for the UN job while he was lobbying frantically – Rudd has had to show his hand as decision-time nears.

But his nomination faces resistance from some right-wing Liberals. Both Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop on Monday said it is a matter for cabinet.

Nelson, who as opposition leader faced Rudd and later was made ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, the European Union and NATO, sees it as an open-and-shut case.

Nelson told *The Conversation* that beyond our borders we should be "Team Australia". While he like other Liberals believed Rudd failed as prime minister, "we're Australians first, we're Australians last, before the Labor or Liberal branding. I think we have a responsibility to support him".

Apart from that, Nelson believes Rudd is "made for the job". "He has immense intellect and a deep understanding of international affairs and diplomacy.

"Each of us is tailor-made for some role – I think this is the one for him. I've seen him on the international stage," when Rudd was addressing NATO. "He is stunningly brilliant."

Rudd, who received some flak from his own side for being too generous to political opponents in overseas appointments, also sent former deputy prime minister Tim Fischer to the Vatican.

Fischer told *The Conversation*: "Kevin Rudd has certain credentials for this difficult job of

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secretary-general of the United Nations, but I too accept this is a matter for cabinet.”

Cabinet minister Peter Dutton earlier this year said of Rudd, “Kevin was never happy just running Australia – he believed he was always destined to run the world. Kevin’s ego makes Donald Trump’s look like a rounding error.”

Bishop, who strongly supports nominating Rudd, explained to the Coalition party room on Monday that “nomination” by the government – which is required for Rudd to be a candidate - is not “endorsement”.

That distinction might be necessary to reassure some Liberal conservatives but even having to make it seems an insult to a former prime minister who, regardless of domestic opinion, is held in high regard internationally.

Rudd is rated as having an “outside chance” by some well-informed Canberra sources, who predict the winner will be the candidate the five permanent members of the Security Council dislike least. The secretary-general is chosen by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council, so each permanent member has a veto. Other sources put his chances at 20% or less. The Eastern Europeans regard this as their “turn” for the job, and there is a desire to have a woman for the first time.

For the government to refuse to nominate Rudd would be nothing more than an exercise in vindictive politics.

On what possible grounds could it justify such a refusal?

That he was a political opponent? The government was quite happy to extend the term of former Labor leader Kim Beazley in Washington.

That he was overthrown by his own party (before later being restored to the leadership)? After

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dumping Tony Abbott as leader the Liberals can't see that as a problem.

That he doesn't have the qualifications? Hardly.

That the Coalition didn't like what he did in government, or the way he operated? That's part and parcel of the democratic system.

That he lacks administrative skills or the right temperament for the job? For the government to make such a judgement would be presumptuous in the extreme.

The New Zealand National government is of a different political colour to that country's former Labor prime minister, Helen Clark but has not had any difficulty backing her for the UN job.

Prime Minister John Key was not just courteous but enthusiastic. "Helen Clark has a vast amount of experience in international affairs which will be hard for other candidates to match. She's a great listener and communicator, and I know she will make a difference if elected," he said.

In a pre-emptive move while he was prime minister Tony Abbott gave private backing to Clark.

Now that the Turnbull government has been put on the spot, the test will be whether it lifts itself above petty politics – and does so with some graciousness. If it took the extraordinary decision to decline to nominate him, it would be the government and Australia that looked bad, rather than Rudd.

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