

Cabinet battle over Rudd a test for Foreign Minister Bishop

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The strength of Foreign Minister Julie Bishop will be tested on Thursday when she proposes the government should nominate Kevin Rudd to run for secretary-general of the United Nations.

Bishop faces some high profile opponents of the nomination, most notably Treasurer Scott Morrison and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton.

It also appears Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is not willing to spend political capital on Rudd, whose UN bid is set to be the first issue to divide sharply the new Coalition cabinet. He's likely to let Bishop run the case and see how it plays.

In comments on Wednesday, Turnbull delivered something of a slapdown to Rudd. "While I know it's a matter of great interest in the media, can I just say with all due respect to Mr Rudd, it isn't the most important issue confronting the cabinet of the Commonwealth of Australia at this time," he said.

Bishop, who returns on Thursday morning from a round of ministerial meetings in Laos around ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, will argue - as she has said previously - that "nomination" does not mean "endorsement".

She is also likely to point out that if the government fails to nominate Rudd this will be viewed by other countries as odd behaviour. It would mean that Rudd would not be eligible to contest the position.

If cabinet rejected the nomination it would be a significant rebuff for Bishop.

Morrison and Dutton have indicated their views about Rudd in public comments ahead of the cabinet meeting, raising the stakes in the battle.

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Bishop has said that Rudd, who is both a former prime minister and a former foreign minister, is qualified for the job given that “the other candidates are former leaders, former prime ministers, former foreign ministers of their country”.

But she will have to deal with opponents claiming he does not have the temperament for the post, would display the same leadership flaws he showed as prime minister and could - if he managed to get the job against the odds - cause complications for the Australian government.

Industry Minister Greg Hunt indicated on Wednesday that nominating Rudd would upset many Liberals. “There are many, many people within our own party and the broader base of the party who will have their concerns,” he said.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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