

Rudd's fate in Turnbull's hands

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Malcolm Turnbull has been left to decide whether the government should allow Kevin Rudd to be a candidate for secretary-general of the United Nations.

After the question divided cabinet on Thursday, Turnbull told a news conference: "We've considered this issue and I owe Mr Rudd a telephone call before I say anything more about it publicly".

After cabinet Turnbull had a discussion with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce.

It was not clear whether Turnbull wanted to discuss the matter with Rudd before signing off on a decision, or whether the telephone call would be just to inform him of an outcome.

In political terms, Turnbull is caught whichever way he goes. To approve the Rudd candidature would outrage many in the Liberal party, while to stop a former prime minister putting his name forward would be seen internationally as a strange course. He cannot be a candidate for the job without government nomination.

Turnbull will make a statement about the outcome on Friday morning.

Bishop argued in favour of Rudd's case; Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and Treasurer Scott Morrison are opposed. There was a wide-ranging discussion in the cabinet room, giving everyone a chance to air an opinion.

Senior government sources point to doubts that have been expressed in the bureaucracy about the government nominating Rudd, on the grounds that his frenetic style might end up in complaints coming back to Australia from permanent members of the Security Council. But there is a counter view in the ranks of officialdom which says that to refuse to nominate him would be an act of petty partisanship and regarded as such.

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

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