

Abbott, on a mission to destroy, is stepping up his stalking of Turnbull

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



Tony Abbott has made the most of media opportunities this week to push his agenda. Dan Hembrechts/AAP

Tony Abbott has thrown further fuel on the fire of anger against Christopher Pyne over his outburst of factional hubris, as the Liberals' internal war rages.

Abbott on Wednesday said he could “understand why some of my colleagues are saying that his position as leader of the house now seems difficult to maintain”.

He went on to point the finger at Malcolm Turnbull. “This as always is a matter for the prime minister. The prime minister picks the team, the prime minister decides what jobs people have got. And if Christopher Pyne is to be given some other assignment that would be a question for the prime minister.”

Turnbull might feel like throttling the indiscreet Pyne but he won't be stripping him of his house job. That sort of over-reaction would just make a bad situation worse.

Senior ministers were publicly locking in behind Pyne on Wednesday, as the man himself grovelled to Liberals in his electorate, saying his remarks were “ill-chosen and unwise” and “I apologise to anyone they have offended”.

Buffeted by what has turned into a toxic mix of factional bitterness, revenge and ambition, Turnbull could do little more than resort to the old tactic of denouncing the media's “fascination with personalities”.

But his line – “the only personalities I'm interested in are 24 million Australians” – didn't cut it.

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At the moment no minister can venture before the media without being peppered about the kerfuffle that followed Pyne last week gloating, in remarks later leaked, at the ascendancy of the moderates and the prospect of an earlier-than-expected resolution of same-sex marriage.

As the Liberals fight and manoeuvre, their Coalition partners the Nationals are watching on appalled, privately wondering at Turnbull's inability to control even his moderate supporters, let alone his party as a whole.

They see the government being trashed and the already diminished chances of winning the next election further reduced. It was the Nationals, remember, who increased their House of Representatives seats by one in what was otherwise a rout for the government in 2016.

Turnbull, who has been duded inadvertently by the big mouth of one of his prominent moderates, is under pressure from two groups of Liberal conservatives.

The old guard, notably Abbott and his tiny band, know how to cause maximum disruption with minimum numbers. Abbott, who is determined to see the end of Turnbull's leadership even if he can't personally be the replacement, is out all this week – on Thursday he will make a speech about submarines to the Centre for Independent Studies.

Then there are the younger conservatives, who want to use the crisis to press for moderate cabinet ministers to be despatched so conservatives can climb the ladder in an early reshuffle.

But reshuffling now would be an unwise move for the embattled Turnbull, who above all needs to find a way to restore stability.

The word in prime ministerial circles is that the reshuffle is expected to be at the end of the year, which is the way thinking has been going for quite a while.

A side effect of this is to put on hold the ambition of Immigration Minister Peter Dutton – the

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effective leader of the conservatives, whom Turnbull keeps very close – to get his homeland security portfolio.

Pyne's foolishness has resulted in a conservative backlash against not just himself but the general power of the moderates. It has also further reduced the chance of same-sex marriage activists within the Liberal Party achieving their end before the election.

The latter haven't abandoned their cause, but admit their prospect of a breakthrough has been made much more difficult by this week's blow up, as Turnbull has toughened his words against a private member's bill.

The Liberal activists need to put the issue aside, despite its salience in the electorate and the cause being right, because it has the potential to be very dangerous for Turnbull's leadership.

In electoral terms, it is now probably unlikely that delivering marriage equality before the election would bring any significant number of votes to the Coalition.

Would failing to deliver it lose votes? One would think most people who put same-sex marriage at the top of what determines their vote would not be supporting the government anyway.

This week's mini-crisis will likely have blown over by the time Turnbull leaves next week for Europe and the G20. But it has exposed his vulnerability in a fractious and divided party and sent the worst of messages to the electorate. And even when it is over, Abbott will still be on his case.

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