

## Grattan on Friday: Abbott shapes up in Liberals' fight over their 'internals'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---



Abbott, for his part, is showing no sign of backing off his continual challenge to the government in his public commentary. Brendan Esposito/AAP

Cory Bernardi, the senator who defected from the Liberals to found the Australian Conservatives, sits like a crow on a fence as those in his former party fight bitterly over its directions and organisation.

Whatever the future holds for the Australian Conservatives – and it will inevitably be an uphill battle - Bernardi could not ask for more auspicious circumstances in which to recruit.

Bernardi's party has nearly 13,000 members nationally – the youngest 15 and the oldest almost 102 – with around 4000 in NSW. The NSW figure compares with a Liberal party membership in that state said to be about 11,000, although some internal critics claim the number is much smaller.

The Australian Conservatives have three state MPs: two South Australian upper house members as a result of its absorption of Family First, and a former DLP member of the Victorian parliament.

Bernardi says about 40% of Australian Conservative members were formerly members or active supporters of the Coalition parties. Some former Liberals probably see the Australian Conservatives as “the party they joined originally”, he says.

Bernardi might have an eye on potential pickings following this weekend's NSW Liberal convention.

The issue at the special meeting is the rules – for which read the distribution of power – in the party's NSW division, which is controlled by a tight factional combination of moderates and soft right.

## Grattan on Friday: Abbott shapes up in Liberals' fight over their 'internals'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

Tony Abbott and other disgruntled conservatives are trying to win support for reform in how candidates are preselected and party officials are chosen. A motion from Abbott's Warringah federal electorate conference (FEC) proposes plebiscites for all candidates and direct election for the party positions. Although other states have plebiscites, in its sweep the Warringah blueprint is radical change on steroids.

Some predict a loss of members to the Australian Conservatives if there is not significant change. Bernardi already has a following within the NSW Liberals – he has been invited to appear at its Roseville branch next month.

While the possible implications for the Bernardi party are an intriguing aspect of the weekend's debate, the immediate focus will be on its consequences for the Abbott-Turnbull conflict, in which – despite disclaimers - it is being seen as another episode.

The party's open wound has been on full display again this week. On Sunday new Liberal federal president Nick Greiner warned of the damage being done and called for the two men to resolve things "face to face".

"If we are not able to present a compelling unified face to the Australian public we won't win the election in two years time - I think it is as simple and as stark as that", Greiner said.

He's right of course. But highlighting the problem is only useful if it helps get a solution – otherwise it just draws more attention to it, putting Turnbull in an awkward position.

On Thursday he was asked by 3AW's Neil Mitchell: "what's wrong with picking up the phone and saying, 'Tony, green tea, my office, let's talk about it'?" Turnbull replied: "I look forward to catching up with him again soon when Parliament gets back if not before", adding that he'd been going to say he'd known Abbott "for a million years – it may feel like a million years – it's about 40 year".

Indeed. Even right back in those early days, these two were on different pages, as recalled in a [BuzzFeed article](#)

## Grattan on Friday: Abbott shapes up in Liberals' fight over their 'internals'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

this month. Turnbull, writing for *The Bulletin* in 1978, disparaged student politician Abbott's "rather boisterous and immature rhetoric" and argued that his "conservative moral views" were too much for the general student constituency.

Turnbull can't fix his Abbott problem. Even if he brought him into cabinet, which he won't, it would likely eventually end in tears.

Abbott, for his part, is showing no sign of backing off his continual challenge to the government in his public commentary. His latest criticism was of this week's decision for a home affairs department; he said the advice to his government was that such a "massive bureaucratic change" wasn't needed.

Abbott has invested a great deal in his push for party reform, and so has a lot of credibility at stake in the convention's result. No one is sure how it will unfold. Open to all party members, and subject to "stacks", about 1400 have signed up to attend. Its outcome won't be the end of the matter – decisions rest with the state council.

Turnbull, squeezed between factional allies who want to limit reform and militant rank and filers, addresses the convention on Saturday morning. He has previously indicated he is in favour of plebiscites, but looks for measured changes rather than Warringah's full monty.

Compromise positions are being pressed by backbencher Julian Leeser and assistant minister Alex Hawke.

Among the restrictions proposed for plebiscites are a longer qualification period (three or four years membership rather than two) and an "activity test" before party members could vote, as well as "grandfathering" electorates with sitting members to the current preselection system.

In an email this week to party members Walter Villatora, president of the Warringah FEC and Jim Molan, the retired major general who helped devise the Coalition's border security policy, denounced the compromise positions as "window dressing".

## Grattan on Friday: Abbott shapes up in Liberals' fight over their 'internals'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

“The Hawke/Leaser reforms will cement in factional domination for another generation”, they said.

The Warringah supporters are arguing an all-or-nothing line. That leaves Abbott in a corner if there is a compromise, making it harder for him to claim any ownership of more limited change. Not that he worries too much about the odd contradiction, as we've often seen.

If he fails to get what he wants and seriously kicks up the dust, that is likely to encourage some disgruntled members to pay their \$25 to Bernardi – who incidentally is holding a meeting for his party's NSW members next Friday.

On the other hand, if the Warringhites have a victory, Turnbull will suffer yet another bout of bad publicity, with more trouble to come from a much-emboldened Abbott.

*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.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-abbott-shapes-up-in-liberals-fight-over-their-internals-81355>