

## Go now: NSW Nationals leader John Barilaro's blunt message to Turnbull

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Malcolm Turnbull has faced an extraordinary attack from the New South Wales Deputy Premier and Nationals leader John Barilaro, who has called on Turnbull to give people a “Christmas gift” by quitting immediately.

Barilaro’s scathing denunciation of Turnbull’s leadership came on the eve of the weekend New England byelection, where Nationals federal leader Barnaby Joyce is seeking to re-enter parliament after being disqualified by the High Court.

It is part of the rippling fallout from last Saturday’s Queensland election, where the Liberal National Party was defeated and the Nationals were left spooked by a big One Nation vote in regional areas.

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Barilaro was furious that Turnbull denied federal factors affected the Queensland loss. “That is just a joke,” he told Alan Jones on 2GB, saying Turnbull was “completely out of touch”.

“You’ve got a party in disarray, a Coalition government in disarray and the community is not unified. And that is all at the feet of the prime minister of Australia.”

Turnbull should have apologised to the Queensland LNP and the people of Queensland “because the shenanigans and the circus that is the federal government today is the reason that we saw the shellacking” of the opposition in that state, Barilaro said.

He said he had just spent four days travelling in the southern part of NSW, where he was confronted by people from all sides of politics who kept talking about the lack of leadership

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federally.

If Turnbull, who could not win an election, did not leave the leadership he would be stabbed in the back in coming months, Barilaro said.

“Turnbull is the problem, the prime minister is the problem. He should step down, allow for a clean out of what the leadership looks like federally,” he said. “What we want to see federally is a reset if the Liberals and Nationals have got a chance of winning the next federal election.”

He said Turnbull had delivered very little since becoming leader. “My view is Turnbull should give Australians a Christmas gift and go before Christmas.”

The comments follow the exposure of Turnbull's political weakness in Canberra this week, when the government was forced into announcing a royal commission on banking after a revolt by rebel federal Nationals.

The royal commission will be led by former High Court Judge Kenneth Hayne and will be asked to deliver a final report by February 1, 2019, with an interim report before that. The terms of reference ARE tight: “it's not going to be an inquiry into capitalism”, Turnbull said.

The Barilaro intervention will fuel more talk about the leadership, although there are not believed to be any active moves to replace Turnbull at this point.

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Turnbull reacted dismissively, saying he thought Barilaro was “just trying to ingratiate himself with Alan and telling him what he wants to hear”.

He said Barilaro had “never raised these matters with me personally”.

“If that was a serious view he held, you would think that he would speak to me directly wouldn't you?” Turnbull said on 3AW.

Turnbull said nobody had come to him to suggest his time as leader was running out.

Federal ministers rallied around Turnbull, while NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian rejected what she described as Barilaro's “personal view”, with which she disagreed. She said she looked forward to continuing to work with the Turnbull government.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Communications Minister Mitch Fifield and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann all hit back at Barilaro.

Fifield targeted Barilaro in personal terms. “To get a run by whacking your own side requires no political skill. It's weak. And it's lazy. And it lacks character.” He said Turnbull “is doing an excellent job as the leader of the nation”.

This coming parliamentary week, expected to be the last for the year, is likely to be challenging for Turnbull.

A Newspoll is due, the MPs' citizenship declarations will be considered – which also could be difficult for Labor – and the ALP will be out to put pressure on the government over penalty rate cuts and other issues in the run-up to the Bennelong byelection on December 16.

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The mood of the week will be affected by the vote in New England. While Joyce is regarded as certain to win, there is a huge field and the size of his primary vote will be carefully watched.

*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 their academic appointment.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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