

Labor moves in on the Barnaby Joyce affair

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Labor party, which started with a hands-off approach to the Barnaby Joyce affair, has now segued into making it a political issue, while trying to still argue that its “personal” aspect should be private.

The opposition is eyeing possible openings to exploit in the liaison between Joyce and his former staffer Vikki Campion - who’s expecting his child - by pursuing questions about processes and taxpayers’ money, as well as harbouring the hope of dragging Malcolm Turnbull into the matter.

Deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek walked the fine line on Sunday.

“I don’t think [Joyce] needs to account for his personal behaviour, his relationships, to the public”, [she told the ABC](#) .

“The only area in which there is a genuine public interest is in the area of the expenditure of taxpayers’ funds, and there have been questions over the last couple of days about jobs that have been created for Vikki Campion, the expenditure of taxpayer funds on travel.

“I think those are areas where the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister ought to be fully transparent”, she said.

Turnbull last week tried to keep away from the Joyce matter by saying it was private.

“These private matters are always very distressing for those involved, I don’t want to add to the public discussion about it. I’m very conscious of the distress this causes to others, in particular Natalie Joyce and her and Barnaby’s daughters. So it’s a private matter, a tough matter. I don’t have any more to say about it,” he said on Friday.

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Pressed later he said he was “not aware of any inappropriate expenditure of public funds”.

But the issue of “public funds” is becoming murkier.

When the Joyce-Campion affair was creating problems in Joyce’s office, she was moved to the office of Resources Minister Matt Canavan. Later a place was found for her with Nationals whip Damian Drum.

Questions are now being asked about the pay and arrangements in relation to these positions. On Friday Turnbull was being quizzed about whether he’d counselled Joyce to remove Campion.

One can only imagine the Turnbull anger about the situation. He comes at it from a personal position of being very family-oriented and his sympathy is clearly with Natalie Joyce and the daughters. Also, with the government starting the year looking better, the last thing Turnbull wants is to have this becoming another distraction, let alone have any suggestion of a role in it.

Joyce by Saturday had publicly taken sole ownership, with a statement “that he had not discussed Ms Campion’s employment with the Prime Minister or his office.

“He confirmed that the Nationals were responsible for decisions relating to staffing in the offices of Nationals’ members. The Prime Minister’s office has an administrative role in informing the Department of Finance.” Labor no doubt will be probing this “administrative role”.

Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, appearing on Sky on Sunday, was clearly uncomfortable. He maintained that “all of my advice is that everything was absolutely above board” while also saying “I am not aware of the specific staffing circumstances of every single one of my colleagues”.

The next few days will reveal whether there is anything to see, in terms of untoward

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arrangements or costs. Nationals sources point to the obvious implications for Joyce if there were any such revelation.

The big question – assuming there is no public money time bomb – is what this will do to Joyce's leadership. There are mixed opinions.

He can point to the fact that in terms of retail politics, he has been highly popular, and led the party to a very good result at the election, in contrast to Turnbull's below-par performance.

His position is protected (even more than Turnbull's, in the Liberal party, is protected) by the absence of an alternative leader.

But the Nationals are at present an unhappy bunch.

There's criticism of Joyce's recent performance, including his handling of the Nationals' part of the pre-Christmas reshuffle, which saw Victorian Nationals Darren Chester dumped from cabinet and assistant minister Keith Pitt ending up on the backbench.

There's ruminating about how his new circumstances will play out in the wider Nationals' constituency, which tends to be conservative and family oriented. Will people have long memories or will they just move on when the fuss dies down?

Perhaps most relevant is whether Joyce will lose his political energy as he deals with new personal circumstances and some loss of respect.

With a bitter separation behind him, it won't be easy.

Tony Windsor, Joyce's old enemy in the seat of New England, is turning the knife, predicting in

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a tweet: "The Eagles are circling, don't be surprised if Joyce resigns "for personal reasons" before the main story claims him ...he will know it's getting close to a one way street to a job with Gina".

With unfortunate if exquisite timing, Turnbull held a family fun day for Coalition MPs at the Lodge on Sunday. Unsurprisingly, there was no sign of his deputy prime minister.

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 their academic appointment.

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