

Nationals president urges party: Don't act hastily on Barnaby

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Nationals' federal president, Larry Anthony, has appealed to the party to give Barnaby Joyce "time", as the Deputy Prime Minister's future sits on a knife edge.

Anthony, who flew to Canberra for talks on the crisis late Tuesday, said afterwards: "It's been an extraordinarily difficult time for the National Party, and clearly for Barnaby Joyce and his family, and for the government.

"It's important people think very carefully about making any significant decisions. You are never wise to make decisions in the heat of the moment. Barnaby should be given time."

With speculation on Tuesday about whether he'd last the week, Joyce's greatest protection in the short term remained the absence of a strong alternative. The atmosphere in Coalition ranks was fevered, with the pressure all the greater because Joyce is due to become acting prime minister next week, a prospect that appals many Liberals. No one knows what the next media story might bring.

Joyce on Tuesday morning issued multiple apologies, as he desperately tried to contain the damage of his affair with former staffer Vikki Campion, who is expecting his child.

He was "deeply sorry" for the hurt he'd caused his wife and daughters, and "deeply sorry" Campion had been dragged into the controversy. The message to supporters and his electorate was that he was "deeply sorry" a personal issue had gone into the public arena.

Later there was a further apology in the Coalition party room, essentially for the trouble he's caused.

"Every political career has a time of trial," Joyce told the meeting, adding he was determined to work through his situation. He thanked colleagues for their solidarity.

To the extent there was solidarity, it was driven by necessity.

Angry Liberals are powerless – they have no say in who is Nationals leader.

A report that Malcolm Turnbull was ringing around senior Nationals was denied – Turnbull is said to have returned a call from a National who called him. A Liberal leader wading into a Nationals leadership matter would be as risky as jumping into crocodile waters.

The Nationals' situation is perfectly described by the “rock-and-hard-place” cliché.

They have a diminished leader, discredited among their conservative base. But the alternatives are less than optimal for a small party that needs strong leadership to extract more for the bush than its numbers would justify.

Resources Minister Matt Canavan is a senator and so not an option. Darren Chester, whom Joyce dumped from cabinet in December, is a Victorian (and a social moderate) – if he were elevated, Bridget McKenzie would have to go from the deputyship because a party with its heartland further north couldn't have two Victorians at the top.

That leaves Michael McCormack, from NSW, solid but not popular enough with his colleagues even to win the deputyship in recent ballots.

On anything to do with the Joyce issue Turnbull's approach - in the party room, in parliament and in the media – is, figuratively, to hold his nose and point his finger at the culprit.

Turnbull on Tuesday again had to answer a batch of questions in parliament including about the definition of a “partner” for the purposes of the ministerial code.

That code bans “partners” working in ministerial offices. Joyce said on Tuesday that Campion was “without a shadow of doubt” his partner now but she wasn’t when she was on his staff.

“Partner is not defined in the relevant ministerial standards,” Turnbull said, directing attention to the definition used by the Department of Human Services.

The [Human Services website says](#) : “To determine if you’re a member of a couple ... we’ll consider the following factors: financial aspects of your relationship; nature of your household; social aspects of your relationship; if you have a sexual relationship; nature of your commitment to each other.”

Turnbull told parliament that “Centrelink considers a person to be in a de facto relationship from the time they commence living with another person as a member of a couple.”

The Joyce issue, however, has now gone beyond the detail of the arrangements made for Campion to move offices, and the like. As one journalist put it, it’s become “the vibe”. In many minds, a question of character.

Joyce’s present imbroglio is bringing out allegations of past tacky behaviour. A woman [contacted the ABC](#) on Tuesday recounting a strange incident that allegedly occurred at an early-evening cocktail party, hosted by the Collections Council (a peak body for galleries, libraries etc), in parliament house in 2009 or 2010.

Joyce, then a senator, was one of the few politicians there. The woman, an senior academic and a director of the (now defunct) council, says she chatted to him – he was charming and merry but not drunk. He gave her his card. When they parted “he grabbed my buttock and squeezed it,” the woman, who wished to remain anonymous, told The Conversation.

She said that before Tuesday she’d only related the incident to her family. A [story in the Murdoch papers](#) about alleged bottom-pinching elsewhere - totally denied by Joyce - prompted her to speak out.

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Joyce's office said of her claim that it was "being asked to comment on an anonymous person who has never made a complaint".

Joyce, for all his campaigning strengths, has always been unpredictable, a potential time bomb. He steadied and focused as he concentrated on pursuing the leadership and then in his earlier days in it. Now the time bomb has exploded and the Nationals are in a deep funk, not knowing what to do.

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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