

Nationals rally behind Joyce's leadership but he is on notice

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Barnaby Joyce has secured his colleagues' backing to hang onto his leadership and Malcolm Turnbull has flagged he will be acting prime minister next week, despite the potential for this to cause further distraction for the government.

Although he is safe for now, Joyce is essentially on notice as leader.

In the short term, he is hostage to any new serious revelations in the media, and in the medium term, to his party's assessment about whether he has become a political negative, as a result of his affair with his former staffer Vikki Campion, who is expecting his child.

Over the last few days Nationals MPs have been divided between a minority who wanted to force him to quit, his supporters who regard him as the party's strongest asset, and those uncertain about what should be done.

Joyce is said to be very aware of the hurt in the party and the fact that he has to work to mend the political damage he has caused.

After a week of mounting crisis since the story broke, and intense internal discussions among Nationals MPs and by Joyce with his colleagues, senior Nationals went out in the media on Wednesday to strongly support the status quo.

Joyce's recently-elected deputy, Bridget McKenzie, who had been previously silent, told Sky she'd give "my absolute rolled gold guarantee ... that come tomorrow, come Friday, Barnaby Joyce will be leading the National Party".

Asked what she had to say to the women in the party, she said: "Look, there is an unease I think for all of us, looking at this as a woman.

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"But I think we also have to recognise that we are realists. These things happen, in every family, in every town, in every workplace, across the country. It's whether it impacts on his ability to deliver. ...

"So yes, there may be a bit of uncomfortableness around his personal life at the moment, but in terms of delivering, what does a woman want out of her parliamentarians and politicians? She wants us to come up here and work our backsides off delivering for them and for her family. That's what he does."

Nationals whip Michelle Landry said: "Barnaby will remain our leader. He has done a lot for us, particularly in regional Australia and I think we should give him a fair go with it."

David Littleproud, promoted by Joyce to cabinet in December, said Joyce would continue to have the support of the Nationals' party room.

In parliament, Bill Shorten asked Turnbull whether he still retained confidence in Joyce and "when the Prime Minister is overseas next week, will the Deputy Prime Minister be the acting prime minister of Australia?"

Turnbull was as brief as he was previously, when he answered both questions with a yes. "You asked me earlier in the week, and the answer is the same as it was earlier in the week," he said.

Some Liberals have been unhappy at the prospect of Joyce being acting prime minister when Turnbull visits the US, believing he will be pursued by the media, creating more bad publicity.

But not to have him acting prime minister would amount to a vote of no confidence in him.

The opposition pursued Joyce's accommodation arrangements in his New England electorate where businessman Greg Maguire, his friend, provided him with six months' free accommodation, worth some \$14,000, in an Armidale townhouse.

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Labor plans to delve into the staffing arrangements made for Campion when Senate estimates are held the week after next.

After 24 hours in Canberra calming the troops, the Nationals' federal president Larry Anthony said: "I think the vast majority of the parliamentary team are supportive of Barnaby".

He said it was now important that the Nationals MPs "get back into their constituencies over the next week – people want to see them working and supporting their communities".

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.

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