

Joyce fires broadside at Turnbull, as Coalition crisis deepens

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Barnaby Joyce has lashed out at Malcolm Turnbull, accusing him of “pulling the scab off” Joyce’s personal life and interfering in National Party affairs.

As the crisis within the Coalition over the Joyce affair deepens, Joyce held a news conference to respond to Turnbull’s Thursday denunciation of his personal behaviour.

Turnbull – who has announced a ban on sexual relationships between ministers and their staff – accused Joyce of a “shocking error of judgement” over his affair with his former staffer, Vikki Campion, who is now his pregnant partner.

Turnbull also said Joyce should “consider his own position”, in effect flagging he would like the deputy prime minister to stand down.

Joyce on Friday said Turnbull’s comments were “inept” and “unnecessary”.

“I listened to it and thought that it was completely unnecessary – all that is going to do is basically pull the scab off for everyone to have a look at.”

In regard to the National Party, “there is nothing that we dislike more than implied intervention into the party processes”.

“We are our own independent political unit – we make our own decisions, especially around those who are the office-holders.”

That outside interference “locks people in ... behind the leader. So I would not be making comments or implied comments about the leadership of the Liberal Party, and we don’t expect to get implied comments about the leadership of the National Party.”

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The plunge in relations between the two leaders is now threatening Coalition unity, with uncertainty about how the situation will play out. While Turnbull is putting pressure on Joyce to go, some Nationals predict it will be counter-productive, as Joyce is saying.

Visiting Tasmania, Turnbull told reporters: “Joyce has my confidence as deputy prime minister”.

But he also said: “Barnaby has been considering his position and I do not think there is any question about that, but I have not called on him to resign. I have not asked him to resign – he has to form his view on his circumstances.

“He has a lot to reflect on given what has happened, and I say again, he has made some big errors of judgement and he acknowledges that.”

Turnbull dodged attempts to pin him down on when he first learned of Joyce’s affair with Campion. “I can’t recall when I first heard rumours but I can say to you that he did not say to me that he was having an affair with this woman – I’m not going to go any further than that.”

Joyce said that he was intending to make sure his relationship with Turnbull “get backs onto an even keel”.

He again made it clear he has no plans to resign.

“My colleagues support me. This was a personal issue – a personal issue that has been dragged into the public arena and I don’t believe that people should be resigning in any job over personal issues.”

Later Friday, Turnbull, obviously alarmed about the increasing fracture between the Coalition partners, told reporters he had not sought in any way to influence the deliberations of the National Party.

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“Neither I nor my colleagues have made any criticism of the National party.”

He said criticism of Joyce’s conduct was not criticism of the National Party.

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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