

Fischer calls for quick resolution of Nationals crisis, while Joyce is determined to fight to the death

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Former Nationals deputy prime minister Tim Fischer has added his voice to those pressing for a rapid resolution of the Nationals crisis, as Malcolm Turnbull admits he doesn't know whether Barnaby Joyce retains his party room's support.

"It has to be resolved quickly," Fischer told The Conversation. Earlier on Monday another former deputy prime minister, John Anderson, speaking [to The Australian](#), advised Nationals MPs to act swiftly to exercise their responsibility and urged Joyce to think through his situation very carefully.

But the Nationals remained apparently paralysed, with [Joyce on leave](#), dug in and defiant, feedback coming from the party's grass roots that he should step down as leader, and his support eroding in the officialdom of the party.

Sources in the Joyce camp say there is no way he will step down before Monday's party meeting.

They say if Michael McCormack - considered favourite to succeed Joyce if he quits or is ousted - wants the job, he will have to challenge in the party room and the parliamentary party will have to own the decision it makes.

In face of [Monday's Newspann](#), in which 65% said he should stand down, the Joyce sources argue the election is still more than a year away, giving time for the fallout from the current furore to pass.

Nationals federal president Larry Anthony held a phone hook up of party officials late on Monday to take soundings.

McCormack, who is veterans' affairs minister, on Monday trailed his coat in an awkward Sky interview in which he repeatedly dodged giving backing to Joyce.

[Asked multiple times](#) whether Joyce had his support, McCormack avoided answering. "I'm sure that members of the National party are listening to our constituents", he said.

"Barnaby Joyce is the leader, there is no spill, there is no vacancy at the moment and certainly Barnaby Joyce will continue to be the leader as long as he gets the support of the National party room," he said. "There is no challenge at the moment". And there was plenty more of the same.

Finally, a cornered McCormack said: "Of course I support Barnaby Joyce. He is our leader".

[On 3AW Turnbull](#) was asked whether Joyce was safe as leader. "Are you asking me whether he commands the support of the majority of members of the National Party? ... I don't know. He says he does and others have said he does, but these are all matters in the gift of the National party room," Turnbull said, adding, "a party room, I might add, which I have never sought to influence in any way".

Meanwhile Turnbull is coming under media pressure over precisely what he knew and when about Joyce's affair with his former staffer, Vikki Campion, his now pregnant partner.

The timing question has become particularly pertinent since Turnbull's very personal denunciation of Joyce's behaviour on Thursday, because the rumours of the affair including the pregnancy had already been rife when Turnbull appeared with Joyce to celebrate the New England byelection win in Tamworth on December 2.

Pressed on when he initially knew about the affair Turnbull repeated that Joyce had "at no time said to me that he was in a sexual relationship with this woman. ... He never made that admission ... to me."

Turnbull said he couldn't recall when he first heard a rumour about it.

Asked whether he did not consider asking him, Turnbull was evasive: "I'm not going to go into

the private discussions I have had with him, other than to say that at no stage did he say to me that he was having a sexual relationship with this lady.”

Pushed on whether he had been misled, Turnbull said: “I’m not going to go into those discussions”.

Bill Shorten moved to keep all attention on the Coalition by cutting off the government’s attempt to put him in the spotlight because he had not clarified Labor’s position on Turnbull’s ban on ministers having sexual relationships with their staff.

“If we get elected, we’re not going to overturn it”, he said.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop made it clear she was less than impressed with the ban, having condemned any such idea when asked a week before Turnbull announced it. She said the change brought the code in line with many work places across Australia. Pressed on her attitude she said: “I will abide by the ministerial code of conduct”.

Newspoll has found that 64% of voters back the ban.

Victorian Liberal backbencher Sarah Henderson told Sky the standard should apply in every MP’s office.

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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