

## Joyce tells WA Nats to leave his future to those with 'skin in the game'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Barnaby Joyce has dismissed a call from the Western Australian state Nationals for him to stand down, bluntly telling their leader they are irrelevant to the issue.

WA Nationals leader Mia Davies contacted Joyce on Tuesday to tell him he no longer had the support of the WA parliamentary National Party as the Nationals' federal leader.

Davies said in a statement she was concerned as WA leader at the "ongoing damage" Joyce was causing the Nationals' organisation.

"The Nationals' brand across regional Western Australia has suffered as a result of Mr Joyce's actions and he has become a distraction at both the federal and state level," she said.

The state MPs urged him to consider his position "in the best interests" of both the federal party and its state branches, believing that position "no longer tenable".

In his reply Joyce pointed out the WA Nationals didn't have a federal MP – their last member (Tony Crook) spent his time "almost exclusively as an independent". The WA Nationals were also not in a state coalition and prided themselves on "their ferocious independence", he said.

"Therefore I find it surprising that a federal issue has so much momentum in the west when people in the east in the National Party have in the majority a different view – and to be quite frank, vastly more skin in the game," he said.

The state Nationals in Victoria and New South Wales are staying out of the battle within the federal party, with Victorian leader Peter Walsh saying: "The federal leadership of the National Party is a matter for the federal partyroom".

The Nationals crisis was no closer to resolution on Tuesday. If anyone wants to challenge Joyce

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next week there will have to be a move for a special party meeting because some senators will be missing from the routine Monday meeting, given that Senate estimates hearings are on.

By making it clear he would have to be blasted out, Joyce has transferred the burden of a leadership change squarely onto his colleagues, a number of whom had hoped he would just go quietly, saving them angst.

Resources Minister Matt Canavan, a strong Joyce supporter, said Joyce had the majority of support in the partyroom. “They see first-hand what he has done here in Canberra, the fights he takes up for us on our behalf, sometimes difficult ones to deliver big projects.”

“It’s my assessment the vast majority of my colleagues want to see Barnaby there and want to see him fight for regional Australia,” he said.

Canavan employed Joyce’s former staffer and now partner Vikki Champion when the Joyce office was seeking to move her on because her relationship with her boss was causing difficulties. Asked on Sky whether at that time he knew she was having an affair with Joyce, Canavan said: “Absolutely not”.

Champion had got the job on her skills and experience, Canavan said. “We were looking to expand our digital media presence.”

NSW Nationals senator John Williams said the feedback he was getting was that “you must stick with Barnaby” and that people were “over the media running [the story] all the time”.

In the US – for which Malcolm Turnbull leaves on Wednesday – comedian John Oliver has ridiculed the Joyce saga on his show Last Week Tonight. Joyce was already comedy fodder in America after his colourful threats to euthanise Johnny Depp’s dogs after they were brought to Australia illegally.

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*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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