

Shattered Nationals meet to chart their post-Barnaby course

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Demoralised Nationals meet on Monday morning to replace Barnaby Joyce, with their deputy leader Bridget McKenzie flagging a push for consensus on the leadership rather than a contest.

Late Sunday, only Veterans' Affairs Minister Michael McCormack, from New South Wales, was a declared candidate after David Gillespie, assistant minister for children and families, pulled out of the race.

Agriculture Minister David Littleproud, from Queensland and close to Joyce, was "weighing his options", according to his spokesman. Several people had urged him to run.

McKenzie told the ABC that in the Nationals "conventionally around leadership, there usually isn't a vote.

"Deputy leadership positions are obviously hotly contested, but convention has been in previous times that we only ever have one candidate. But who knows? That's up to the members and senators."

Joyce will formally resign as leader at the meeting, after his [announcement on Friday](#), in the wake of the scandal over his affair with his former staffer, now his pregnant partner, and a [sexual harassment claim](#) made to the Nationals by a Western Australian woman.

The claim has set off fresh trauma for the party after the name of the woman who made it, former Western Australian Rural Woman of the Year Catherine Marriott, [was leaked](#). She had wanted her identity kept confidential.

The Nationals have been accused of the leak, with the president of the National Farmers Federation, Fiona Simson, tweeted:

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McKenzie said she had “absolutely no evidence to suggest that the National Party has been the one to actually put Ms Marriott’s name forward”.

She said she had commitments from the Nationals’ federal president and federal director that the party did not breach Marriott’s request for confidentiality.

Pressed on where else the leak could have come from, McKenzie said: “My understanding is, through a range of networks, that it wasn’t unknown who the complainant was.”

As the Nationals, reeling from recent events, try to regroup, maverick George Christensen, from Queensland, questioned the value of the Coalition for his party. He said the party must choose a leader “who will deliver for regional Australia rather than serve at the table of the elitists’ metropolitan feast in the hope of nicking a few scraps for the bush”.

“I believe the formal Coalition is too restrictive. I would rather see a Liberal prime minister, Liberal deputy prime minister, and a full cabinet of Liberal ministers than have to compromise our values and the welfare of the good people we represent,” he wrote on Facebook.

McCormack, 53, entered parliament at the 2010 election representing the seat of Riverina. He is a former journalist and was editor of The Daily Advertiser in Wagga Wagga. While editor he published in 1993 a strident anti-homosexual editorial, for which he had to apologise repeatedly over the years.

McCormack is socially conservative but has not had a sharp profile on issues generally, beyond his commitment to regional areas and small business.

Littleproud, 41, has had a meteoric rise. He only entered parliament at the 2016 election but was elevated by Joyce from the backbench to cabinet in the December reshuffle.

Update

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Littleproud announced just after 11pm Sunday night that he would not be contesting the leadership. He said in a statement: “Now is not the time for internal contests. Now is the time for all individuals to be team players. Now is the time to think about stability and the good of the party.” He said it was time for The Nationals to get behind Michael McCormack as leader.

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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