

The Minister for International Development and the Pacific, senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, has quit the frontbench, delivering a swingeing attack on Malcolm Turnbull for ignoring the Liberals' conservative base.

In her resignation letter to the Prime Minister, Fierravanti-Wells reminded him that months ago she had told him Peter Dutton should become deputy Liberal leader, replacing Julie Bishop.

The government remains in deep crisis, after Turnbull fended off a challenge from Dutton. There is a general expectation that there will be a second challenge.

A string of frontbenchers who had backed Dutton offered to resign, but Turnbull did not take them up.

They included Michael Sukkar, assistant minister to the treasurer; senator James McGrath, assistant minister to the prime minister; Angus Taylor, Minister for Law Enforcement and Cyber Security; and Senator Zed Seselja, assistant minister for science, jobs and innovation.

Early Tuesday Turnbull threw open the leadership and Dutton nominated. He was defeated 35-48 but his substantial vote has left him in a position to build for another attempt.

Dutton immediately quit the ministry, in which he held the home affairs portfolio; he declined Turnbull's offer for him to stay. Treasurer Scott Morrison will act in the home affairs post, pending a reshuffle.

Fierravanti-Wells, in her hand-delivered letter of resignation, said that after last year's Bennelong byelection, "I made comments publicly about concerns that the party was moving too far to the left and that we were losing our conservative base."

"In January, we had further discussions where I openly expressed my views on a range of issues.

"Over the year, I have continued to express my concerns. The same sex marriage debate eroded further the support of our base.

"In my own portfolio, I was disappointed that my frank and forthright comments regarding China were criticised [by Foreign Minister Bishop]. I am pleased that subsequent events and media scrutiny have fully vindicated me raising these concerns.

"Our conservative base strongly feel that their voice has been eroded. They needed some demonstrable indication that there are conservative voices around your Cabinet table.

"Some months ago, I suggested to you that Peter Dutton should become the deputy leader. I also suggested this to [senior Turnbull staffer] Sally Cray and only recently at Kirribilli I spoke to [former chief of staff] Peter Woolcott. I believe this would have been an important move for stability and would help to neutralise some of the more strident criticisms.

"I know I speak for many of conservatives in the party, most especially in our home state of NSW," she wrote.

The Dutton forces are trying to keep momentum going as strongly and as fast as possible towards an early second vote. Delay could complicate the situation for Dutton, especially if other candidates emerged.

Sources said that if Turnbull for some reason did not run in a subsequent ballot, Bishop could enter the field. She declined to rule this out on the ABC on Tuesday night. She would not run against Turnbull.

Senate leader Mathias Cormann, a key conservative figure who is a close friend of Peter

Dutton, told parliament Turnbull retained his support.

“I disagree with my good friend Peter Dutton. I support Prime Minister Turnbull. I’ve supported him loyally since he was elected leader in September 2015 and I will support him loyally as his representative in this chamber until the next election and - subject to the will of the Australian people - hopefully beyond, ” Cormann said.

Previously Dutton and Cormann were unified in being Turnbull’s praetorian guard, protecting his right flank. If Cormann shifted that would be immediately fatal for Turnbull.

After his defeat in the ballot, Dutton began to define the issues he wants to speak out on from the backbench – including immigration - and to seek to reshape his image to give himself a broader, more positive profile.

“When you’re stuck in front of a camera talking about the serious issues of national security and border protection it’s pretty hard to crack a smile,” he said.

He said the government needed “a more succinct message”.

The Nationals entered the fray, although they don’t have a vote. Nationals Minister Darren Chester publicly warned against ousting Turnbull in a second challenge.

He said there was no reason “to think that any potential challenger, if they were successful, would command the numbers in the House of Representatives.

"We have a one-seat majority and I suggest there would be colleagues who would consider their future if this was to eventuate”.

Two cabinet ministers who voted for Dutton issued statements calling for unity.

Human Services Minister Michael Keenan said: "I respect the outcome of today's party room meeting and the Prime Minister has my full support. The important thing now is for the Coalition to unite and take the fight up to Bill Shorten and high taxing and high spending agenda which would be a disaster for our country."

Trade Minister Steve Ciobo tweeted "Party room votes are a secret ballot. The party room has decided leadership of our party. We must unite to defeat Labor."

Wednesday's edition of the Wentworth Courier reports that Turnbull has promised to stay on as member for the seat of Wentworth irrespective of whether he remains leader. Asked by the paper whether he would remain if he lost the leadership in a later ballot, a spokesman for Turnbull said yes, according to the paper.

There has been speculation that if he were ousted as prime minister he would leave parliament at once, creating a byelection.

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/fierravanti-wells-resigns-from-ministry-accusing-turnbull-of-ignoring-liberal-partys-conservative-base-101924>