

Dutton camp presses for quick second leadership ballot

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Dutton forces mounted a push on Wednesday night to get a quick second vote on the leadership, seeking names to petition Malcolm Turnbull to call a meeting.

Peter Dutton and his supporters do not want Liberal MPs to disperse late Thursday without a vote, fearing a loss of momentum for his campaign.

Having to wait until after a fortnight's break for the next parliamentary sitting could put Dutton under much more scrutiny over policy, and risk negative feedback when MPs return to their electorates.

Delay could also possibly see the emergence of other contenders, such as Treasurer Scott Morrison.

But on Wednesday night the government whip's office said there was no special meeting planned and "there never has been any special meeting".

Rumours circulated during the evening about the number of names that had been gathered for the petition for the meeting, which requires 43 signatures.

Turnbull supporters accused the Dutton camp of generating "fake news".

As the Dutton forces ramped up the pressure, frontbencher James McGrath, assistant minister to the Prime Minister, announced he had met Turnbull to "insist" he accept the resignation offered by McGrath on Tuesday.

McGrath was one of multiple frontbenchers who offered their resignations after voting for Dutton on Tuesday.

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McGrath said his resignation had now been accepted. "Like Peter Dutton has said, we must do everything in our power to stop Bill Shorten ever becoming Prime Minister," he said.

His Tuesday letter said: "The people who have for all their lives counted on us to look after them and their families are now questioning our commitment to them. Our people feel forgotten, ignored and spoken down to. As a Liberal National Party senator for Queensland, this is an intolerable situation."

This takes the actual frontbench resignations to three – the others being Dutton and a junior minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells.

Turnbull on Wednesday told a news conference that a number of frontbenchers had offered to resign and "I've had discussions with all of them.

"Look, what I'm endeavouring to do is to obviously ensure that the party is stable, to maintain the stability of the government of Australia. That's critically important," he said.

"And so, the cabinet ministers, apart from Peter Dutton of course, who came to me and told me that they had voted for Mr Dutton in the leadership ballot, have given me unequivocal assurances of continuing loyalty and support."

In parliament a number of ministers who voted for Dutton on Tuesday – Greg Hunt, Michael Keenan, Angus Taylor, Alan Tudge and Steve Ciobo - were asked whether they retained enough confidence in the prime minister, the government and its policies, to remain a minister.

All eyes have been on Senate leader Mathias Cormann, who had not been in the Dutton camp. A switch by Cormann would be fatal for Turnbull. Sources believed he was concerned about the impact a switch would have on business confidence.

Another complication for Dutton is the attention that has come on questions around his eligibility

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to sit in parliament.

Labor in the House of Representatives pursued the suggestion that he could be ineligible under the constitution's section 44 on pecuniary interests. This says a person is incapable of sitting if they have "any direct or indirect pecuniary interest in any agreement with the Public Service of the Commonwealth".

Dutton through a family trust has an interest in child care centres that receive Commonwealth funding. The key question is whether it involves an agreement with the public service.

Dutton maintains his legal advice is that he has no constitutional problem. Turnbull told parliament he had not seen the advice and the Solicitor-General had not been asked for an opinion.

Subsequently Attorney-General Christian Porter said in a statement that given the matter had been raised in question time and in the media "I determined to seek advice from the Solicitor-General on the issues raised."

Peta Credlin, Tony Abbott's former chief of staff said this week: "it's well known about his interests in childcare centres ... he recused himself from any conversations we ever had in policy terms."

Craig Laundy, a junior minister and a Turnbull supporter, said Dutton should release the advice "just to allay any concerns".

Labor released advice from Bret Walker SC and James Mack that argued Dutton was incapable of being chosen for the parliament and therefore not entitled to continue to sit. They said if the issue were referred to the High Court there was a "reasonable prospect" he would be disqualified.

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Dutton on Wednesday started to be tested on policy, after he proposed the GST should be taken off electricity bills.

Morrison said this would cost some \$7.5 billion over four years. “That would be a budget blower, an absolute budget blower”, Morrison said. Dutton also favoured a royal commission into power companies.

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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