

The Liberals stand at a crossroads. As Malcolm Turnbull flagged on Thursday, this battle is about an attempt to drag the party to the right.

Let's be frank: Turnbull has made a hash of his prime ministership. In a business where expectations are crucial, he's failed to meet those he raised. Maybe they were too high, but when you knife your leader, people have a right to be demanding.

Turnbull has small-l liberal values. But he has always been driven by his overweening ambition to be top dog. This led him to sell some of his political soul to get the leadership, and another slab of it when PM, as he tried to placate his party opponents.

He confused many of those voters who thought they knew the old Malcolm. He failed to deliver what would have rusted on backbenchers – a thumping victory in 2016. This made him even more vulnerable to the conservatives' assault.

They were never going to be satisfied until they got him out the door. Tony Abbott was on a mission. The ideological hardliners were obsessed with the climate, free speech and other culture wars. Their discordant voices have been amplified a hundred-fold by their good mates in News Corp, including Sky, and on 2GB. Events then played into the critics' hands with the poor Longman byelection result.

Abbott did much of the spade work to weaken Turnbull but even the conservatives couldn't contemplate his return.

So they coalesced behind Peter Dutton, one-time Queensland policeman for whom Turnbull fashioned that massive home affairs portfolio from which Dutton resigned this week.

The plan apparently was to move against Turnbull after the expected 40th losing Newspoll next month. But events accelerated, as Turnbull's National Energy Guarantee collapsed under a backbench revolt. As the clouds gathered Turnbull, looking for a tactical advantage, called on

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Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Tuesday's leadership vote, defeating Dutton 48-35. The indifferent margin exposed him to a second Dutton tilt later.

Initially, the second round had been expected in weeks, not days. But by Wednesday the Dutton forces judged they needed to move instantly; delay could erode their support.

Out on a personal and policy charm offensive, Dutton was already running into flak. His proposal to remove the GST on electricity bills was attacked; his desire to smile evoked cynicism. And the question over his constitutional eligibility to sit in parliament (because of a pecuniary interest issue) was looming larger.

When the Duttonites moved to get a quick vote, Turnbull again played tough, saying they had to muster the required 43 votes on their petition for a meeting.

Partly, he was trying to ensure if he couldn't have the prime ministership – and that became clear when a batch of senior ministers resigned on Thursday - Dutton wouldn't have it either.

On Tuesday, the contest was Dutton V Turnbull. The field for Friday – assuming Turnbull loses the “spill” vote - comprises, besides Dutton, Treasurer Scott Morrison and Liberal deputy Julie Bishop.

Dutton's first hurdle is to get a favourable Solicitor-General opinion about his parliamentary eligibility. If he doesn't, he'll be headed to the High Court, not the Lodge.

If he receives a legal tick followed by the party tick, the conservatives will have gained an unprecedented grip on the Liberal party's throat (although they'd have some internal squabbles, for example over populist-versus-dry economic policy).

This triumph of the right would bring its own costs. Dutton is very unprepared for the job. He's well versed in national security but underdone in senior economic policy experience (he held the

junior post of assistant treasurer in 2006-07 in the Howard government).

He's little known in the broad Australian community and, while he might help the Coalition vote in parts of Queensland, he could lose votes elsewhere.

He would have little time to "grow" in the job, or refashion his divisive, rather cardboard image. With Turnbull promising to quit parliament, and suggestions about flaky House numbers, he would have an extremely difficult situation to manage, and perhaps an early election – for which the Liberals are not in good shape.

Morrison, with his experience as treasurer, is much better prepped. Of the three candidates, he'd garner the most respect in the business community, and could be expected to run an economically responsible line. He's something of a chameleon and highly pragmatic, so where he would position the party ideologically is unclear. But he'd not take it to the extreme right.

Among the trio, Bishop is the longest odds but the most interesting. She's the only one with some recognition on the international stage and a good deal of popularity in the opinion polls.

Bishop has the stamina of a horse, with an unrelenting foreign travel schedule that also makes time for visiting MPs' electorates (will some be remembering her welcomes?). There's a question, however, about her capacity to carry the economic debate. The Liberal party she presided over would be middle of the road.

Probably any of the three would lose the election. As with Labor when it reinstated Kevin Rudd, the question realistically is who'd best "save the furniture". But more fundamentally, the ballot is about the sort of face the Liberals want to turn to the Australian people.

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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