

Turnbull resigning seat on Friday, giving Morrison a real-time voting test

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Malcolm Turnbull is set to resign from Parliament this week, as the Liberal federal executive prepares to call nominations for his Sydney seat of Wentworth.

The former prime minister on Monday night told his federal electorate conference, at a meeting scheduled a month or more ago, that he would resign on Friday. He has written to his community and will send that letter on Tuesday.

Turnbull repeated the point he has made about a “week of madness”, that had disgraced the parliament and appalled the nation.

He had always said that the best place for former prime ministers was out of the parliament and “recent events amply demonstrate why”, he said.

With the Liberals bracing for a real-time test of their popularity at a byelection expected early October, Turnbull’s son Alex fingered those backing the coal industry for their role in his father’s fall.

In a hard-hitting interview with Fairfax Media, the younger Turnbull warned the Liberal party could be hijacked by financial interests that would make windfall profits if the government assisted coal projects. He said these interests “have their hooks into the Liberal Party ... which has no money”.

Wentworth has a 17.7% margin but Turnbull’s personal vote is large and the campaign there could be difficult and certainly will be expensive.

Tony Abbott’s sister Christine Forster confirmed she will contest Liberal preselection. Dave Sharma, former ambassador to Israel, is regarded as a strong contender. Andrew Bragg, a former acting federal director of the Liberal party, is among those being mentioned as possible preselection candidates.

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Peter King, the former member for the seat who Turnbull knocked out at a 2004 preselection after a bout of mutual branch stacking, has expressed some interest.

Turnbull's son-in-law James Brown has ruled himself out, saying on twitter he had "a young family to look after and mission to complete".

Former minister Craig Laundy, who has been shattered by the leadership events and said he did not want to be considered for the frontbench, has flagged that he may not recontest his marginal Western Sydney seat of Reid.

"The significant challenges we faced last week took a massive toll, both emotionally and physically, hence my decision to take a step back [to the backbench], and consider what my future holds," he said in a statement.

On Monday Tony Abbott was still considering Prime Minister Scott Morrison's offer for him to become "envoy" on Indigenous affairs.

Shock jock Ray Hadley on 2GB revealed Morrison was using him to try to influence Abbott to take the position. This is despite Hadley recently bitterly denouncing Morrison.

A week ago, in vituperative remarks, Hadley declared Morrison as "a piece of work". "If he told me it was raining outside, based on his recent performance, I'd go outside and check."

But there has apparently been a rapprochement's since Morrison's victory on Friday. "Can I sincerely say to you I think he's fair dinkum," Hadley told Abbott of Morrison's offer, on the basis of his conversation with the new prime minister.

But Abbott was concerned about the substance of the position and how it would fit into the scheme of things. "I don't just want a title without a role" he said; he'd want to know what he could be adding to the work of others.

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Morrison did not want Abbott in cabinet, but he does want to be seen to be making a gesture of conciliation to the former leader, who has been a critic of policy on energy and immigration in particular.

Barnaby Joyce has enthusiastically taken up Morrison's offer to be "special envoy" on drought. It gets him back travelling around regional Australia with a clear purpose.

Meanwhile, around bureaucratic circles there will be interest in whether Morrison will keep Martin Parkinson, Turnbull's right hand bureaucrat, as secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

When Abbott won office, he immediately sacked Parkinson from his then position of secretary of treasury – though embarrassingly, he had to retain him for more than a year for reasons of convenience.

Parkinson is an accomplished and long-experienced public servant. One of the main marks against him in the eyes of Abbott and his then chief-of-staff Peta Credlin was that under Labor he'd headed the climate change department, and had obviously personally believed in addressing the policy challenges associated with that issue.

Turnbull brought Parkinson back as head of the Prime Minister's department.

The climate wars were one among several of the driving forces behind the coup. So the climate ideologues may gun for Parkinson.

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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