

Liberal Julia Banks defects to crossbench as Scott Morrison confirms election in May

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The government has been delivered a fresh major blow with the defection of Victorian backbencher Julia Banks to the crossbench, delivering a swingeing attack on the right of the Liberal party.

In an emotional speech, Banks told parliament she had had time to reflect on “the brutal blow against the leadership, led by members of the reactionary right wing.”

While she pledged to give the government confidence and supply, her defection has highlighted again the deep divisions within the government, and reopened wounds over the August leadership coup that ousted Malcolm Turnbull and saw then-deputy leader and foreign minister Julie Bishop go to the backbench.

It will give even more muscle to the newly-empowered crossbench. It has also increased the chances of Labor mustering the numbers to [refer Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton](#) to the High Court to determine whether he is sitting in parliament in breach of section 44 of the Constitution.

Banks, who spoke at midday, did not inform the party room beforehand, government sources said.

As she was delivering her speech to the House of Representatives, Scott Morrison was holding a news conference at which he announced the budget will be on April 2, and confirmed the election will be in May, the latest the government can run.

In a further sign of disunity, Bishop has undermined the government on the crucial area of energy policy, saying it should do a deal with Labor on a National Energy Guarantee.

The defection of Banks, who at the time of the leadership coup [called out bullying](#) within the Liberal party, comes a day after the Coalition formally went into minority government in the House, with the swearing in of independent Kerry Phelps.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: Day One of minority government sees battle over national integrity commission*](#)

With the loss of Banks the government has 73 on the floor of the House. This excludes the Speaker, Tony Smith, who has a casting vote. A simple majority is 75, but 76 votes are needed to suspend standing orders. Labor has 69. There will now be seven crossbenchers.

Ever since the coup, it has been thought Banks might jump ship to the crossbench.

Banks, who won the marginal Melbourne seat of Chisholm for the Liberals from Labor in 2016, did not rule out running as an independent at the election, saying she would look at her options in the new year.

Praising Turnbull and Bishop as “visionary inspiring leaders of sensible centrist liberal values with integrity and intellect”, she told the House: “The gift of time in reflection has provided some clarity regarding the brutal blow against the leadership. Led by members of the reactionary right wing, the coup was aided by many MPs trading their vote for a leadership change in exchange for the individual promotion, preselection endorsements or silence.

“Their actions were undeniably for themselves, for their position in the party, their power, their personal ambition, not for the Australian people who we represent, not for what people voted for in the 2016 election, not for stability, and disregarding that teamwork and unity delivers success,” she said.

“The aftermath of those dark days in August then acutely laid bare the major parties’ obstructionist and competitive actions and internal games, or political point-scoring, rather than for timely, practical, sensible decisions on matters which Australians care about.”

Banks said equal representation of men and women in parliament was “an urgent imperative, which will create a culture change.” She called the Liberals’ rejection of quotas “blinkered”.

She said an independent whistleblower system to enable the reporting of misconduct was clearly needed. “Often, when good women call out or are subjected to bad behaviour, the reprisals, backlash and commentary portrays them as the bad ones.”

Banks said her “sensible centrist values, belief in economic responsibility and focus on always putting the people first and acting in the nation’s interest have not changed.

“The Liberal Party has changed. Largely due to the actions of the reactionary and regressive right wing who talk about and to themselves rather than listening to the people.”

Banks said the three female independents, Phelps, Cathy McGowan and Rebekha Sharkie, “are at the core of what I stand for”.

Her attack comes a day after Senate president Scott Ryan also lashed out at the right, saying Liberal voters who had deserted the party in the Victorian election had sent the party a message. “They don’t want views rammed down their throat, and they don’t want to ram their views down other people’s throat.”

Read more: [Senate president Scott Ryan launches grenade against the right](#)

Bishop has [told](#) the Australian Financial Review: “The government needs to consider energy policy through the prism of securing bipartisan agreement with Labor, to establish a long-term, stable regulatory framework that will support private-sector investment in generating capacity.”

Only the NEG could achieve “elusive” bipartisanship, she said.

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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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