

Malcolm Turnbull accuses his critics of “paranoia”

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Malcolm Turnbull has struck back angrily at a report that he has been helping independent Kerryn Phelps, his successor in Wentworth, as chaos continues to fracture the Liberals.

Responding to a front page-lead story in The Australian headed “Turnbull plays invisible hand”, the former prime minister tweeted, “Attribution bias - blaming others for the consequences of your own actions is a common symptom of paranoia.

“Imagining “invisible” people are out to get you is also a classic symptom. Not often on the front page of course...”

The [report](#) said Turnbull had been in regular contact with Phelps and had had a former electorate office staffer work for the new member for three days to help in the transition.

It quoted a senior Liberal source saying they believed Turnbull was advising Phelps on strategy and that his hands were “all over” the defection of Liberal MP Julia Banks to the crossbench this week.

The report also said that Phelps had counselled Banks before her defection.

The story was another manifestation of the deep bitterness still consuming the Liberals from the leadership coup, which has been reactivated by the Banks’ defection. Banks made a stinging attack on those who ousted Turnbull in her speech to parliament.

Phelps said on Thursday that Turnbull had had no contact with her during the Wentworth campaign. Afterwards he had offered assistance for a smooth transition. She said she and Turnbull had not discussed Banks.

She told Sky that Turnbull “was very kind in being able to allow a couple of his former staff

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members to come in to do a handover to my staff members to make sure that they understood which grant programs needed to be progressed and which organisations we needed to be in contact with.”

Phelps confirmed that Banks had approached her before defecting.

“Julia reached out to me for some consultation about what that process might look and feel like, and I indicated that I would be there to support her in that transition and the three female crossbenchers were there to support her when she gave her statement,” she said.

Meanwhile embattled right wing Liberal Craig Kelly, who faces losing preselection, has changed tactics in his fight to survive.

After earlier repeatedly refusing to rule out defecting to the crossbench, Kelly - wearing a T-shirt with the face of Robert Menzies on it - [told](#) the ABC he would not do so.

He said he had a contract with the people of his Hughes electorate to serve through the terms as a Liberal member.

He did not rule out running as an independent if he lost preselection, saying “I haven’t considered that”. He claimed to be confident of being re-endorsed – although the numbers are against him.

Posing with the T-shirt wearing Kelly, Tony Abbott tweeted, “Always good to be with a real Liberal!”.

The Senate on Thursday voted to alter the government’s sitting timetable for next year to ensure Senate estimates hearings will be held on the April 2 budget before the election is called. The timetable released earlier this week would not have had estimates hearing before the poll.

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Labor is also introducing in the Senate its own bill to protect LGBTI students against discrimination, after negotiations between the government and the opposition on a bill reached an impasse.

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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