

Rebel right wing Liberal Craig Kelly is a paradox – a man who chronically lacks the numbers but possesses the power to force prime ministers to protect him.

On Monday, fresh from a G20 where he was less than feted, Scott Morrison heaved a few moderates on the NSW Liberal executive. A wobbly cross-factional deal to preserve Kelly held together.

In the process former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull's nose was bloodied. Turnbull had tried to persuade the moderates to veto the endorsement - which would have pushed Kelly to a preselection ballot he'd have lost.

Turnbull's foray was counter-productive, for the party and himself. Moderate backbencher Trent Zimmerman [told](#) the ABC that "Malcolm's intervention made it hard for the executive to do anything other than what they did".

Though once Morrison's authority was on the line, the executive could do little but what he wanted.

It was very different from 2016 when Turnbull urged support for Kelly, [writing](#) that he had "a fine reputation for standing up for his local constituents and was unafraid of taking on controversial issues".

Back then, pressure from Turnbull led Kelly's opponent Kent Johns to agree not to stand for the preselection.

Johns kept up his branch numbers and prepared for another tilt. But lightning struck twice.

In a tweet on Monday that seemed remarkable for its restraint Johns, who is a NSW Liberal

vice-president, said, “While disappointed, I respect and accept the Party’s decision, and will continue to serve the Party and proudly campaign for the re-election of the Coalition Govt”.

Before the last election supporters of Kelly were [quoted](#) as warning “a challenge against him would send the message the party is becoming a version of the Labor Party.” Kelly’s backers never let up on referring to Johns’ Labor background.

This year, the times suited Kelly. The right is strong within the party. And with the Morrison government now dealing with a hung parliament, the risk that a disendorsed Kelly could defect to the crossbench, and run as an independent, loomed large.

Morrison asserted on Thursday that the possibility of Kelly going to the crossbench had “never been the subject of our conversations.”

It didn’t have to be – the threat has hung in the air for months – although Kelly has been all over the place in his comments.

For example in May the ABC [reported](#) Kelly was “understood to have told local members that he will resign from the Coalition and sit as an independent, if the ‘higher powers that be’ do not secure his nomination’. But he’s now told Sky News he will remain a Liberal no matter what happens.”

Kelly is a favourite of the right wing commentariat.

In 2016 Alan Jones [said](#) : “Let me say to Kent Johns and anyone else who’s thinking of standing for the preselection out there and to put a torpedo under this bloke. You’d better pull your head in, Kent Johns. Because I’ll tell you what: if you put your head up, there’ll be a hell of a story that’ll be told about you, Mr Johns.”

On Sunday night Sky’s Paul Murray went through Turnbull’s tweets on the Kelly preselection,

branding them “lies”.

Kelly has had a special place on Sky, with so many appearances his colleagues joke he must have a sleeping bag there.

As chair of the Coalition’s backbench energy and environment committee, a spruiker for coal, and close to Tony Abbott, Kelly ran a constant and unhelpful commentary on the Turnbull government’s attempt to get an energy policy together.

He helped kill the NEG (and thus Turnbull’s prime ministership) - he was one of those threatening to cross the floor if the associated legislation on emissions went ahead.

Turnbull is correct when he says that overriding a local preselection contradicts the recent push by the right of the party for a more democratic structure.

This point isn’t negated by the fact that the preselection panel Kelly would have faced was a transition one – changes that have been made to the system are not fully operating yet. It would have been a more democratic preselection than the executive deciding to have no ballot at all.

It is reasonable for some Liberal women, and others, to compare the treatment of Kelly with that of Jane Prentice, a moderate from the Queensland LNP.

When she lost a preselection in May, there was no special fix, despite the fact she was an assistant minister. Prentice did not threaten to go to the crossbench. She’s now quietly on the backbench serving out her term.

There are multiple messages in the Kelly affair. They are about the power of the right; the willingness to abandon process (the closeness to an election is no excuse – the Kelly preselection should have been held months ago), and the desperation of the Prime Minister.

View from The Hill: Craig Kelly triumphs in the 'outwit, outplay, outlast' game of Survivor

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Postscript: In the Senate on Monday Labor's Glenn Sterle asked members of the public observing proceedings, "How many people in the gallery respect your politicians? Put your hand up if you do." No hands went up.

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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