

Ian Macfarlane: after the defection bombshell, a cup of tea

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Warren Truss and Barnaby Joyce have been keeping a secret from their Prime Minister for two weeks.

And when it dropped that Ian Macfarlane — one of Malcolm Turnbull’s mates — was defecting from the Liberals to the Nationals, it was a bombshell.

Turnbull didn’t know until Macfarlane went to see him on Wednesday to deliver the news.

Macfarlane describes the discussion between the pair — who had been warriors together against the Nationals in supporting Kevin Rudd’s emissions trading scheme — as “fairly forthright” but ultimately amicable.

Yesterday, Turnbull and Truss met in the Prime Minister’s office at 7.50am and, over a cup of English breakfast tea served from a Japanese teapot, thrashed it out for 40 minutes.

By last night, Nationals MPs crowded into Joyce’s office to toast the return of a prodigal son and a victory over the Liberals.

But the ramifications of the past 24 hours will be felt for months, as the shift in numbers - between the two parties could trigger changes to the ministry.

Macfarlane, former industry minister in the Abbott government, first began speaking to Truss in the days after he was dumped from the ministry in the middle of September. The Nationals leader originally thought he was coming to him as a friend. They were both born in Kingaroy, famous for being Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s home town. They were friends in their youth, long before politics called to them, but remained close even though they opted for different ends of the Coalition.

Truss revealed that Macfarlane was “angry and upset” at being dropped by Turnbull, but it was a while before he realised there was more to their chats.

Turnbull is said not to have realised how upset his friend was when he asked him to take one for the team and give up his post.

But Macfarlane, who first became a minister in the Howard government and returned under Tony Abbott, was still not done, and told colleagues he wanted to contribute more to policymaking for regional Australia.

They said he was angered when the government flirted with signing a fossil fuel subsidy treaty that may have jeopardised the future of the diesel fuel rebate.

Faced with the choice of retiring or sitting on the backbench, he invented a third option: to renew himself as a National.

Joyce, the Nationals deputy leader, became heavily involved and gave crucial backing to Macfarlane that he would support him in the tricky negotiations that were ahead. Senior Nationals have told The Australian the deal was clinched about two weeks ago when it became apparent the Queensland party would support Macfarlane’s switch.

Some Nationals were so overjoyed by the prospect of a win over the Liberals they hinted - obliquely that a big story over “operation Scottish” was about to break.

While in Queensland the merged party is called Liberal Nationals, in Canberra MPs make a choice to sit in one party room or the other. They have “joint” meetings, but there are very deliberate and separate meetings of Liberals and Nationals in dedicated rooms with their history on the walls.

Macfarlane’s defection also brings back to the Nats the seat of Groom, based around Toowoomba, once a political jewel before the Liberals took it in 1988 when the “Sir Joh for Canberra” tensions between the two parties were still raw.

Macfarlane cut his teeth in agripolitics — with the Queensland Graingrowers Association — which is one of the Nationals political breeding grounds.

In 1998, when Macfarlane decided to run for politics he faced a choice. He opted for Howard’s Liberals even though many political observers at the time thought he would run for the Nationals.

Yesterday, he did.