

Factional games turn the Liberals against each other

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Broken election promises, disunity, factionalism, disloyalty, self-indulgence and triumphalism — they read like a list of all those things voters dislike most about politics. Yet these are the topics Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne thrust into the public spotlight through his secretly recorded speech from the weekend.

Mr Pyne, who is Leader of the House and a senior tactician for Malcolm Turnbull, was caught speaking freely about his moderate faction's power within the government since installing Mr Turnbull as Prime Minister. Addressing the annual "Black Hand" dinner for the Liberal Party's moderate or "wet" faction, the South Australian MP boasted about the seniority of the faction's leading lights. "Friends, we are in the winner's circle," he claimed, "but we have to deliver a couple of things and one of those we've got to deliver before too long is marriage equality in this country."

This was a provocative statement within the Coalition given the party promised at the election to put the issue to a plebiscite — a move since blocked by Labor. Conservative Liberals remain implacably opposed to legislating same-sex marriage and that position is also one of the conditions the Nationals demanded before reaffirming the Coalition agreement under Mr Turnbull's stewardship. So despite about two-thirds of voters supporting gay marriage — according to opinion polls — acting quickly to legislate the change would create great disharmony on the conservative side of politics. "To dump the plebiscite, to do anything without a plebiscite would be a breach of faith with the people," was the swift response from former prime minister Tony Abbott on radio. Mr Turnbull, too, was forced to quickly rule out changing the policy.

However, the damage from this ill-advised factional speech runs much deeper than the problematic issue of gay marriage.

Mr Pyne opened up old wounds when he declared that he and Attorney-General George Brandis — who both served in Mr Abbott's cabinet — had always been loyal to their faction. "Now there was a time when people said it wouldn't happen but George and I kept the faith," Mr Pyne said. "We voted for Malcolm Turnbull in every ballot he's ever been in."

Again, this prompted a response from Mr Abbott, who told Sydney radio 2GB's Ray Hadley that it was "incredibly disappointing" his colleagues' loyalty apparently was "never" there. Asked further about his relationship with Scott Morrison, Mr Abbott said: "One of the problems when you have the political execution of a first-term, democratically elected prime minister is that there is long-term bad blood created and it takes time for those wounds to heal." This is ugly, public, personal and political bloodletting. The last thing Mr Turnbull needs is friends like Mr Pyne antagonising other Liberals by gloating about internal victories and promising to continue their factional agenda. Equally, the Prime Minister does not need the leader he deposed retaliating in public debate about matters of personalities, policy and politics.

This generally petulant and pathetic display of disunity comes as the Coalition is mired in consistent and dangerously low opinion poll numbers and the nation should be grappling with serious issues of budget repair and economic reform. As if the Coalition's national primary vote (as measured by Newspoll) of only 36 per cent isn't bad enough, its federal vote in Queensland has fallen to 33 per cent and in South Australia it has crashed below 30 per cent.

This is a dire situation. Yet we see a governing party consumed in its own battles. In an ideal world Mr Turnbull would have cabinet colleagues mature enough to shun the university-level politics of an event such as the Black Hand dinner. And in that ideal world his senior MPs would be promoting policy successes and attacking Labor's blocking tactics on budget repair and the gay marriage plebiscite rather than targeting each other.

It is another case of self-harm from the Coalition, which should have been looking to build some momentum this week after leaving parliament behind it for the winter recess and chalking up its significant win on the Gonski 2.0 education funding package. Instead, it has regurgitated old battles of policy and leadership. The Prime Minister won't be thanking his confidant, Mr Pyne. But he also will be wondering how to battle his way out of this cycle.

The answer must be — as ever — to turn the political debate to policy and meaningful reform. Mr Turnbull needs to sharpen his differences with the Labor Party on key areas of economic reform to give voters a real choice and to focus his own team on essential and productive debates.

He should double down on the economic debate, with the most current issues being media reform and energy policy.

The Coalition needs to settle on policies worth fighting for, then take its advocacy to the public and the Senate. It can compromise in the end, if necessary. But for now voters need to see government MPs fighting for the nation, not among themselves.