

Pyne same sex marriage claim is least of Liberal Party's worries



Christopher Pyne (left) and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Picture: AAP

[Chris Kenny](#), The Australian, 12:19PM June 26, 2017

The jig is up. The Liberal “Moderate” faction is triumphalist, the Coalition is hopelessly divided and the unfolding crisis is not so much about losing government but preserving the Liberal party.

[The tape obtained by News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt](#) reveals leading Moderate, Defence Industry Minister, Leader of the House and right-hand-man to the Prime Minister, Christopher Pyne, in a gloating mood. “We are in the winner’s circle,” he boasted, referring to how the Moderates now controlled the government, before going on to say how they were working to deliver same sex marriage.

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If Malcolm Turnbull and his team do legislate for same sex marriage it will be a clear broken promise, a breach of their Coalition agreement with The Nationals and an incendiary swipe at the conservative wing of the party. Yet the gay marriage revelation from this tape is the least of the worries.

What Pyne has confirmed for all to see is that the overthrow of Tony Abbott and installation of Turnbull is seen by the Moderates as a factional takeover of the party. This is poison to the party membership and another turn-off to mainstream voters.

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As this column has argued from the day Turnbull won the leadership, the only way for him to succeed was to repudiate this view. Turnbull needed to adopt the mainstream and conservative positions of the Abbott government and concentrate on presenting them under new leadership. A shift to the left was always going to be a mistake.

Yet he has gradually shifted closer to Labor on education, health, climate, energy, gay marriage and even fiscal management. The product differentiation between the major parties has been whittled away. Mainstream voters are starting to feel they've been left stranded — hence the rise in support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation, Cory Bernardi and other minor parties.

The Coalition and Turnbull's only hope for survival has been to wake up to its misguided strategy and sharpen the differences with Labor on climate, energy, economics and national security. On gay marriage they should have been able to win the argument on the popular plebiscite but they never had their heart in it.

Pyne's revelation is not particularly earth-shattering — conservative commentators started calling out the Moderate takeover of the party even before there was any policy evidence for it. And over the past two years the evidence has only mounted, especially since this year's budget.

However the tape of the Prime Minister's confidante addressing the Moderates' "Black Hand" dinner at the weekend is the first time we have received confirmation of all this from the very top of the government. It is an unfortunate confession, made in high spirits among like-minded Liberals.

The "Black Hand" dinner dates back more than 30 years when it was organised by the small "L" Liberals who opposed John Howard. During the successful years of the Howard government the Moderates were placated with a few cabinet positions as they sought to differentiate themselves on social policies.

But, with a few exceptions, they did not contribute greatly to government. Their secretive "Black Hand" dinners were seen as a harmless indulgence at the annual party conference — a chance for them to get together and whinge about how the conservatives weren't taking enough notice of what they thought were their more clever and genteel ideas.

The gathering last weekend was different.

Pyne, who has been a core member of this group for decades, was claiming victory. And he was promising more policy shifts to the left. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the first "Black Hand" victory dinner comes when the party is in dire straits. Conservative Liberals will hit back — and the backlash has already started with Abbott attacking Pyne's on radio.

Conservative Liberals will not sit back and watch their party being taken over by MPs such as Craig Laundy, who only got into parliament on the back of Abbott's conviction and then knifed him before the next election. We can expect simmering tensions to rise to the

surface. The Nationals too, will only weep at the self-indulgence of their Coalition partners, and their tin ear for the public mood.

As this column has often noted, nothing in politics is ever as good or as bad as it seems. Right now, the Liberals had better hope that dictum holds sway.