

Same-sex marriage brawl fuels Lib turmoil



Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne last night. Picture: James Croucher

[David Crowe](#), The Australian, 12:00AM June 27, 2017

A furious row over same-sex marriage has rocked the Turnbull government amid fears of a voter backlash that could unseat 20 Coalition MPs at the next election, sparking anger at the “oxygen” being wasted on another internal brawl.

The new clash looms as some Liberals consider a conscience vote in parliament that could legislate gay marriage by the end of this year, despite a warning from Tony Abbott that the government must hold to its pledge of a popular vote to decide the social reform.

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Malcolm Turnbull insisted there were “no plans to change” his government’s support for a plebiscite after a damaging leak of Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne telling colleagues the change would come “sooner than everyone thinks”.

Liberals fear a continuing campaign to destabilise the government and heighten pressure on Mr Turnbull amid a slump in the opinion polls that would deliver the biggest Coalition defeat in decades if an election were held this month.

Analysis by The Australian suggests the Coalition would lose 20 seats — four in NSW, nine in Queensland, two in South Australia and five in Western Australia — if the election matched the state-by-state swings shown in the quarterly Newspoll survey published this week. Two cabinet ministers — Peter Dutton and Christian Porter — would be among those to lose their seats, along with Michael Keenan and Ken Wyatt.

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Mr Pyne's remarks were made to a group of about 200 members of the Liberal Party's "moderate" wing over drinks at a private function on Friday night, where he hailed the faction's sway over the government and promised action on same-sex marriage. He said marriage equality had to be delivered "before too long" and told his colleagues it would happen, according to a tape of his remarks sent to News Corp Australia journalist and Sky News commentator Andrew Bolt.

"We're going to get it. I think it might even be sooner than everyone thinks. And your friends in Canberra are working on that outcome," Mr Pyne said.

Listen to the audio of Christopher Pyne talking about gay marriage below.

Christopher Pyne tell a Sydney bar the government's plans for marriage equality0:41



Hear Christopher Pyne tell a Sydney bar the government's plans for marriage equality. Audio courtesy Bolt Report, Sky News.

Conservatives blamed Mr Pyne for yesterday's furore over same-sex marriage when the government should have been campaigning on the successful passage of its Gonski 2.0 school funding boost in the Senate last week. "The PM's trying to hold things together in a difficult situation," said one Liberal. "For Christopher to go and say what he said was just sheer stupidity."

Former employment minister Eric Abetz said cabinet ministers such as Mr Pyne should "live up to the responsibilities" with their remarks, while others said the leak showed the high stakes involved if Mr Turnbull or others backflipped on the plebiscite. The leak itself sparked talk of a source within the moderate wing who had doublecrossed Mr Pyne. "This was an inside job," said one Liberal. "Somebody who doesn't like Christopher really got lucky that night."

Liberal defector [Cory Bernardi launched a scathing attack on his former colleague](#), labelling Mr Pyne the "most untrustworthy person" he'd ever met in politics. The leader of the newly

formed Australian Conservatives party told Bolt's Sky News program: "Character is everything in politics and I've known Pyne longer than anyone in that parliament and he is not a person of good character. He is the most untrustworthy person I've ever met in this business."

Mr Pyne issued a statement saying the government had "no plans to alter the policy" of a plebiscite. "I support marriage equality and if Labor had supported the plebiscite, marriage equality would be a reality now," he said.

His spokesman denied there were imminent plans to legalise gay marriage. "The minister did not say action on marriage equality was imminent," he said. "The minister said that while marriage equality had failed to materialise over the last two years it would become a reality eventually."

One of those at the drinks said the remarks had been no different from Mr Pyne's pep talk at a similar event two years ago alongside factional allies including Attorney-General George Brandis and Defence Minister Marise Payne. Others saw the remarks themselves as inoffensive but the leaking of them to Bolt as another step in a conservative campaign to undermine Mr Turnbull by claiming he was "secretly plotting" to enact gay marriage.

"It's a sign of how desperate things are that this is at the top of the charge sheet — that you have to make an issue out of a complete beat-up," said a senior moderate.

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Mr Turnbull blamed Bill Shorten for voting against a same-sex plebiscite and insisted the popular vote remained government policy, a view backed by MPs who said the Prime Minister had told them the same thing in private.

"I've had no indication that Malcolm wants to depart from the plebiscite," said one MP who supports marriage equality. Another said: "I've told him to change his position. He has not changed his position."

Even so, some MPs believe the law must be changed because the internal fight is damaging the government and the plebiscite is an "untenable" position to take to the next election because it would bind the Coalition for another three years.

West Australian Liberal Dean Smith has started a push to reconsider the policy at the Coalition partyroom meeting when parliament resumes in August, two years since the plebiscite policy was adopted.

Liberal MP Warren Entsch, the government's most outspoken advocate for gay marriage, backed that push.

Additional reporting: Rosie Lewis