

'End civil war or Libs will lose'.

Rosie Lewis, The Australian, 12:00AM July 17, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott must meet face to face to end the bitter infighting that is crippling the government or risk defeat at the next election, the new Liberal president has urged, backed by senior MPs and party figures.

Nick Greiner, elected Liberal president last month, yesterday delivered a brutal assessment of the party's disunity, warning that unless the Prime Minister and Mr Abbott reconciled and the organisation presented a "compelling united face" to voters, the government would hand the election to Labor in two years. "There is a big problem which needs to be resolved if the Liberal Party is to be fully competitive at the next election, and that's stating the bleeding obvious," he said.

Mr Greiner's intervention mobilised Liberal MPs, who agreed a "breakthrough" was necessary to stop tensions from spilling into the public arena, but were divided over whether such a meeting could succeed. Former Liberal Victorian premier Jeff Kennett endorsed the call for action, telling The Australian he suggested to Mr Greiner last week that he sit down with the two men to resolve their differences. "I'm hopeful Nick will be able to firstly get them together and, secondly, they will agree to work together, and that means Malcolm as leader will have to make compromises, as will Tony," Mr Kennett said, suggesting the Prime Minister offer Mr Abbott a cabinet spot as indigenous affairs minister. "If they are not mature enough to do it then neither of them are worthy of continuing in the job they have."

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Mr Greiner said that ultimately peace talks needed to be led by Mr Turnbull and the former prime minister without intermediaries, but he would ask them to sit down for a "chat" in the coming weeks.

Liberal Party infighting has dominated the winter recess — normally a chance for government MPs to sell the May budget to their constituents — and sparked cries from the Nationals for its senior Coalition partner to quit focusing on itself.

Mr Greiner, a moderate who received Mr Turnbull's backing for the Liberal presidency, said the government had achieved a "great deal", especially given the composition of the parliament, but that was not being reflected in the polls because voters had been distracted by "noise" and "bad music".

The Coalition continued to trail Labor in the latest Newspoll by 47 to 53 per cent in two-party terms while Mr Turnbull lost ground to Bill Shorten as preferred prime minister. "We fundamentally need to stop talking about ourselves," Mr Greiner told the Sky News Australian Agenda program. "I will talk to Tony, I will go and talk to Malcolm ... At the end of the day they need to resolve this between themselves. "All of this is not just about strong personalities, people who've lost jobs, got jobs, this is actually very bad for the country because what it's doing is sucking the energy out of really difficult, complicated, long-term issues."

Mr Greiner said he would be happy to attend any meeting between Mr Turnbull and Mr Abbott, if "appropriate", and stressed it was the former prime minister's responsibility just as much as the current leader's to fix the problem.

However, former Abbott government minister Kevin Andrews put the pressure back on Mr Turnbull. "While the two men may have policy differences on big issues like energy, their relationship is cordial. The central issue is how the PM, as leader, reconnects with our base and rebuilds the support we have lost. That is the priority," he told The Australian.

A Liberal frontbencher also said it was up to Mr Turnbull to keep the party united and make Mr Abbott feel valued, but it was "never too late" to end the brawling. "We're in an acutely difficult situation where we need to make that happen. There will need to be some grand bargain between the two," the MP said.

But senior frontbencher Christopher Pyne, a staunch Turnbull ally, told ABC Radio this morning that the public was not interested in "beltway conversations". "I and the rest of the cabinet are entirely focused on the economy, national security, we're focused on getting on with the job," Mr Pyne told ABC Radio National. "These are very much inside the beltway conversations that the Australian public are not interested in. Walking around my electorate, people ... they're interested in jobs for themselves and their children, they're interested in energy prices. They're not interested in the 'in the bubble conversations'".

Concern over the dysfunction was highlighted yesterday at Queensland's Liberal National Party state conference by leader Tim Nicholls, who distanced himself from Mr Turnbull and urged the party faithful to ignore "happenings in Canberra".

One Liberal frontbencher agreed wholeheartedly with Mr Greiner's push for a meeting but said a three-pronged approach was needed: the meeting; a resolution as to what Mr Abbott would do next in the party; and the development of a political strategy ahead of the election. The MP conceded there would be "quite a lot of cynicism" about whether an Abbott-Turnbull meeting was achievable but said: "We need a breakthrough like this or we're toast."

Northern Queensland Liberal MP Warren Entsch said the party was confronted with an "Abbott problem" and it was "highly unlikely" a meeting was going to stop the undermining of Mr Turnbull. "Malcolm's just getting on with his job and the other fellow is just sniping at the side," he said. "I'm hoping (Mr Abbott) will have another 'come to Jesus moment' and realise he's not helping at all."

A senior Liberal also said almost everyone in the party wanted peace, but "Abbott wants revenge". "Greiner is a terrific force for good but there is a relentlessness about Tony Abbott's campaign against Malcolm Turnbull that is not going to be satisfied, short of the destruction of Turnbull," the Liberal said. Mr Abbott has stoked division in recent weeks by ramping up calls for new conservative policies, while leader of the house Christopher Pyne infuriated colleagues by saying the party's moderate faction was "in the winners' circle".

Mr Turnbull's decision to invoke the legacy of Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies to defend his government also drew fire.

Mr Abbott was on leave and could not be contacted for comment. The Prime Minister's Office declined to comment.

Additional reporting: Sarah Elks