

Tony Abbott to 'cross floor on energy'



Tony Abbott has issued a warning over a clean energy target. Picture: AAP

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Tony Abbott has sent a warning to Malcolm Turnbull that he will cross the floor of parliament and vote against any government attempt to legislate a clean energy target, in a move that threatens to increase divisions in the Coalition partyroom over energy policy.

The threat came as the Prime Minister yesterday blamed Mr Abbott for subsidies flowing to energy companies under the Renewable Energy Target being “too generous”.

In an escalation of the backbench-led campaign to kill off plans for a CET, Mr Abbott this week relayed his staunch opposition to a senior member of the government, saying he could not in good conscience vote for a policy that continued to subsidise renewable energy sources. Mr Abbott would likely be followed by as many as six backbench colleagues, with several telling The Australian they would be compelled either to abstain or to vote against the government on the issue.

The Australian has confirmed that Mr Abbott approached a senior member of the government this week to relay his intentions. It is understood the Prime Minister’s Office has been made aware of Mr Abbott’s position.

Abbott: Green dreamers have failed us

“He has let the government know his position,” a government source said. “He won’t vote for a clean energy target.”

The move by the former prime minister came as Mr Turnbull yesterday noted that the RET had been legislated in its current form when Mr Abbott was prime minister in 2015. He warned that the RET was “too generous” but said the scheme would remain in place until 2020, as it was legislated, and his government was considering a “future policy” towards 2030.

In a commentary article published in The Australian today, Mr Abbott appears to issue a rallying call to colleagues to intercede in the energy debate, claiming that the backbench would need to save the Turnbull government from itself. Mr Abbott writes that it would be a political and economic disaster for the Coalition to go down the path of a new renewables target on top of the RET and a betrayal of Coalition policy that contributed to the election victory in 2013.

“It would be unconscionable for a government that was elected promising to scrap the carbon tax and to end Labor’s climate change obsessions to go down this path,” he writes. “This is where the Liberal and National backbench might need to save the government from itself.”

He also writes that no subsidies should be paid to new wind and solar projects.

The partyroom battle over a CET is threatening to repeat the drama of the 2009 internal Coalition spill over an emissions trading scheme that then cost Mr Turnbull his leadership of the Liberal Party.

Mr Turnbull has so far refused to rule out a CET.

The government is awaiting a second report from the Australian Energy Market Operator on the state of coal generation across the country. One backbench MP, in a warning to Mr Turnbull, said some backbenchers were “motivated” over the issue. “We have been through this before,” the backbencher told The Australian. “You could assume that we are just as motivated as before. “There would be a lot of people very upset if this was the path that he chooses.”

Up to 20 MPs voiced their opinion over the CET in a Liberal partyroom meeting last week.

Mr Turnbull has yet to land on the final shape of the government’s energy policy, in response to the Finkel report. It is not likely to go to the partyroom until the end of the year.

Mr Abbott writes today: “The government needs to pick a legislative fight with Labor, as well as a rhetorical one. “There should be no subsidies for further unreliable wind and solar power. Let’s replace all renewable energy targets with a reliable energy target of 100 per cent so that the power is on all the time. “Even if freezing the RET fails in the Senate, at least it would demonstrate that the government wants to reduce power prices while Labor wants to increase them. “If we are to have more renewable power, it must be economic without subsidy or mandate; and the generator must be required to provide back-up power when it fails. As for the Finkel-recommended clean energy target, it simply must be dropped.”

Opponents of the CET have seized on modelling accompanying the Finkel report that suggested a CET would lead to an energy mix of 42 per cent renewables by 2030. The CET would ultimately replace the RET. “The only way to get our country back on track is to rid ourselves of the emissions obsession that has produced the wind-power-induced blackouts in southern Australia,” Mr Abbott writes.

“For the past decade and a half, our power system has focused less and less on delivering affordable and reliable power — and more and more on reducing emissions. “The Howard government’s original 2 per cent Renewable Energy Target was massively expanded under Labor. Then there was the emissions trading scheme, first proposed when Malcolm Turnbull was environment minister but introduced as a carbon tax under Labor.

“To his credit, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is now talking about coal almost as much as pumped hydro and wants to keep open the next coal-fired power station that’s otherwise set to close.”