

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Michael Kroger lashes Liberals over GetUp! meetings



Victorian Liberal president Michael Kroger. Picture: AAP

Simon Benson, Andrew Clennell, *The Australian*, 12:00AM November 8, 2017

Senior Liberal Party officials have condemned federal Liberal MPs for conducting secret meetings with left-wing activist group GetUp!, accusing them of undermining their own government.

Victorian Liberal Party division president Michael Kroger — who is non-factional with wide support from conservatives and several key moderates — told *The Australian* the organisational wing of the party was furious, following revelations backbench MPs Tim Wilson and Trent Zimmerman had met GetUp! over the same-sex marriage vote.

Other moderate Liberal MPs, including cabinet minister Christopher Pyne, have also recently been exposed as having had secret meetings with the hard-left activist group founded by a former Labor staffer and funded with the help of unions.

“It is fair to say that people in the organisational wing are furious,” Mr Kroger said. “They consider GetUp! as a mortal enemy of the Coalition. It was unknown to office bearers that these secret meetings were taking place. If the party’s (conservative) base wasn’t on fire, it certainly is now.”

The censure by the organisational wing of the party came as Malcolm Turnbull yesterday defended colleagues from his moderates support base who had - admitted dealing with the Labor-aligned outfit.

“GetUp! goes and calls on MPs all over the place,” he said in Tamworth. “So if you’re a member of parliament you meet everybody. You meet people who agree with you and people who don’t agree with you.”

Former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce, who was campaigning with Mr Turnbull for the December 2 New England by-election yesterday, lashed out at GetUp!, accusing it of running a dirty campaign against him. But he agreed that MPs were entitled to meet with the group. “I know they poured about a quarter of a million dollars into a campaign against me and they did their arse, didn’t they?” Mr Joyce said. “GetUp! don’t help me. They’re just lefties and crazy buggers.”

Victorian Liberal MP and frontbencher Michael Sukkar was one of the conservative MPs GetUp! targeted through a text-message campaign on the eve of last year’s election. It accused Mr Sukkar of being a supporter of racist groups. Mr Sukkar increased his margin despite the campaign. “I find it difficult to believe that any Liberal member of parliament would conspire with GetUp! on any issues, considering that this is a group who ran the most vile and dishonest campaign against us at the last election,” Mr Sukkar said. “It would be a betrayal of the hundreds of Liberal Party members and supporters who had to contend with these tactics. It’s no different to a Liberal member secretly working with the CFMEU on industrial relations policy.”

Revelations of fraternisation between GetUp! and members of the Liberal Party’s moderate faction have raised suspicions within conservative ranks that colleagues may have helped GetUp! at the last election to draw up a hit list of marginal-seat conservative MPs.

GetUp! director Paul Oosting has revealed the group agreed to go after “hard right” Liberal MPs and quarantined moderates and backers of Mr Turnbull from campaigns. Mr Wilson defended his meeting with GetUp!, claiming he had never worked with the organisation. Mr Zimmerman rejected any collusion.

Tasmanian senator Eric Abetz said GetUp!’s tactics were designed to suggest it was not a “left-wing front” and to paint it as more mainstream. “Having the -

occasional meeting with a Liberal doesn't change the fact that GetUp! hands out against Liberals on polling day, funds ads attacking Liberal leaders and actively campaigns almost exclusively against Liberal candidates," he said.