

Turnbull defensive amid MP crisis

Joe Kelly, Geoff Chambers, The Australian, 12:00AM November 4, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull has refused to support a citizenship audit of MPs, despite Labor pushing for a process of “universal disclosure”, amid a widening political scandal that threatens the government’s slim majority in parliament. Returning from a week in Israel, the Prime Minister yesterday launched an impassioned defence of senior minister Josh Frydenberg, who this week sought urgent legal advice regarding the possibility he holds Hungarian citizenship.

Mr Turnbull, who rejected any suggestion Mr Frydenberg could hold Hungarian citizenship, said the search to expose dual-national MPs had descended into a political “witch hunt” and “trial by innuendo and denunciation”. He said Hungary had “stripped (Mr Frydenberg’s) mother and her family of their citizenship and would have pushed them into the gas chambers” at the height of World War II. He called for a return to the “land of common sense”.

Leader knows he’s on solid ground

Mr Frydenberg yesterday denied he was a dual national and said his mother, Erika Strausz, was stateless when she was born in Hungary in 1943. She never sought citizenship, her family came to Australia in 1950 and she became an Australian in 1957. “I did seek some advice and I am very confident with that advice but also contacted the embassy here and I was very comforted by conversations with them,” he told the ABC.

Former Liberal MP Alex Somlyay, who was born in Hungary and travelled to Australia as a “stateless” person in 1949, told The Weekend Australian he was encouraged in the early 1990s to renounce any claim to Hungarian citizenship. He said the Hungarian ambassador had contacted him in the period after the *Sykes v Cleary* 1992 High Court case, which made clear those with dual citizenships were ineligible to sit in federal parliament.

GRAPHIC: The Hungary connection

“The Hungarian ambassador at the time rang me and said there may be a problem because the Hungarian government was going to legislate or had legislated — it was when they got a new conservative government in Hungary — to reinstate every expat’s citizenship rights,” Mr Somlyay said. “Basically it

was giving you the right to a Hungarian passport. I wrote him (the ambassador) a letter and that was my renunciation of any rights I may have had to Hungary.”

Mr Somlyay said Peter Costello, then the opposition legal affairs spokesman under leader John Hewson, conducted an “informal audit of the Coalition people” to see how many were born overseas.

“Quite a few people on our side got upset,” he said. “It wasn’t really an audit. It was a ring around.”

Under a Hungarian citizenship law aimed at addressing the stateless status of Jews driven out of Hungary during WWII, anyone born in Hungary between 1941 and 1945 is automatically considered a citizen. The Hungarian citizenship act of 1993 also states that “children born in Hungary of stateless persons residing in Hungary” are recognised as Hungarian citizens. Mr Frydenberg said he made inquiries months ago and argued that, to become a Hungarian citizen, an individual needed to take “active steps” including an interview process and producing documents. “Neither of those steps were taken in my case, or on my behalf,” he said. “All I’ll say is that I am very satisfied with my position.”

Mr Turnbull has been urged by conservative MPs to support an audit of MPs’ citizenship status. He was targeted yesterday by Bill Shorten, who called on the Coalition to support a process of “universal disclosure” in which MPs would detail any foreign ties to parliament, although he stopped short of supporting an audit.

Speaking in Perth last night, Mr Turnbull described Mr Shorten’s call for universal disclosure as “characteristically confused”. Mr Turnbull earlier rejected an audit, saying only the High Court could resolve breaches of section 44 of the Constitution and backed the existing parliamentary referral system for MPs who had failed to conduct the proper checks.

Mr Shorten seized on the rejection to accuse the government of a “cover-up” of former Liberal Senate president Stephen Parry’s dual British citizenship and called on Mr Turnbull to support a bipartisan approach to ending the citizenship scandal. “I am deeply concerned that following the resignation of Senator Parry, serious stories have emerged about senior ministers being aware of his situation,” the Opposition Leader said.

“This cover-up is incredibly alarming. I’m prepared to co-operate with the government to come up with an agreed process that brings this issue to an end.”

Despite his call to end the fiasco, Mr Shorten’s office again refused to release documents that would publicly clear Labor MPs with eligibility concerns, including Justine Keay and Katy Gallagher. Labor declined to pursue questions about Mr Frydenberg’s citizenship yesterday, with deputy leader Tanya Plibersek saying “we are actually getting into pretty disturbing territory now”. “I mean, these people, like many millions, fled the Holocaust and I really do think that we’re going a bridge too far when we start to pursue people in these circumstances,” Ms Plibersek said.

Additional reporting: Paige Taylor