

Abbott reform bid fails as Liberals reach compromise



Former prime minister Tony Abbott has failed in his bid to reform the Liberal Party. Picture: AAP

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Factional powerbrokers are hoping for peace in the NSW Liberal Party after a compromise motion for state and federal preselections, involving ordinary members having a greater say, was passed at the party's state council meeting at the weekend.

The backer of bigger reforms, former prime minister Tony Abbott, lost his bid for full plebiscites for NSW and federal seats.

Mr Abbott lost to a compromise motion, backed by state ministers Matt Kean and Dominic Perrottet. Under this "Bennelong" motion, there will be about 10 per cent state council and state executive involvement in lower-house preselections and about 90 per cent involving the vote of ordinary members. Upper-house preselections remain a matter for delegates selected by party branches.

After an attempted deal between Mr Abbott and the other side fell over, the new system will be instituted only after the next state and federal elections.

The first version of the Abbott-backed "Warringah" motion, calling for unadulterated plebiscites, went down 235 to 288 yesterday, with a second version failing 216 to 300.

The Bennelong motion passed on the hands, without a vote, with its supporters claiming as much as 90 per cent support. Sixty per cent was required for a constitutional change.

After the vote on Saturday, Mr Abbott said the reform was “not everything members wanted” but important nevertheless.

“The Liberal Party is still too much of an insiders’ club but it’s much less of an insiders’ club than it was,” he said. “We need to ensure the ordinary member does not remain the forgotten person of the Liberal Party.

“And it was disappointing to hear members of the party establishment stand up and talk about the need for ordinary members to continue to be excluded from many of the important decision-making processes we make.”

Mr Abbott urged members not to quit over the loss.

Yesterday, Mr Abbott’s ally on the Warringah motion, Jim Molan, said: “I’m personally disappointed but life goes on. All reform is progressive and there’s no reason why there should not be democratic reform in NSW in the Liberal Party. A form of democracy has spoken and I listened to it yesterday.”

A senior MP who backed the Bennelong motion said: “I think the Bennelong motion reflects the spirit of Rosehill (the original motion last year calling for plebiscites); one member, one vote.” The source said the Bennelong motion drew about 90 per cent backing. “I think the Warringah people calling for people to quit the party shows this was never about putting the party first.”

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian said: “I am pleased all members of the Liberal Party will have a greater say at all levels of decision-making.”