

## Backbench test for Turnbull on energy policy



Eric Abetz and Tony Abbott are members of a backbench lobby group to promote government support for the construction of new coal-fired power stations.

The Australian, 12:00AM April 3, 2018, [GREG BROWN](#), [JOE KELLY](#)

Malcolm Turnbull faces a challenge to his signature energy policy from a group of Coalition backbenchers, including Tony Abbott, Eric Abetz and Kevin Andrews, who have formed a lobby group to promote government support for the construction of new coal-fired power stations.

Liberal MP Craig Kelly and Nationals MP George Christensen yesterday claimed more than 20 government MPs had joined the newly created Monash Forum, named after World War I military hero John Monash, a key figure in opening Victoria's Latrobe Valley to coal production.

*The Australian* was told last night that Barnaby Joyce had thrown his support behind the new informal political faction along with up to 11 other Nationals. The former deputy prime minister did not respond to requests for comment.

The lobby group could threaten the Prime Minister's national energy guarantee (NEG) as he attempts to secure support from state and territory governments for a new national framework later this month.

While not opposed to the NEG, the Monash Forum aims to test Mr Turnbull's assurances to the Coalition partyroom that the government framework is "technology-neutral" by aggressively pushing for more coal-fired power stations.

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One member of the new group said: “Some of us see energy as being the only ticket to ride in the next election and the NEG is clearly not going to cut it for us.”

The backbench lobby group push comes as Mr Turnbull faces pressure over his leadership, with the Coalition on track to trail Labor for 30 consecutive Newspolls — the benchmark Mr Turnbull used to oust Mr Abbott as prime minister in September 2015.



Craig Kelly.

*The Australian* understands the new ginger group is based on the Lyons Forum of the early 1990s which was made up of conservative Liberals who played a vital role in facilitating John Howard’s leadership ascension in 1995.

The Lyons Forum, dubbed the “God squad” by some commentators, included Liberal MPs Mr Andrews and Senator Abetz.

The Monash Forum is understood to have its own mission statement or policy manifesto, which was given to backbenchers when parliament sat in Canberra last week. Some MPs were - encouraged to sign documents to confirm their support.

“It says the government is building a Snowy 2.0 so why can’t it build a

Hazelwood 2.0,” Mr Kelly said of the manifesto.

“The group wants to see the replacement of Australia’s existing coal-fired power fleet with new high-efficiency, low-emissions (HELE) coal-fired power stations.”

Mr Kelly and Mr Christensen said yesterday they expected more than 30 MPs to join the forum, which would be more than half of the backbench. Mr Christensen said 10 Nationals had formally joined the group and another two had verbally told him they would join.

*The Australian* understands that as well as Mr Abbott, Mr Andrews and Senator Abetz, South Australian MP Nicolle Flint and Nationals senator John Williams are among the new group’s members. Other MPs linked to the group are Mr Joyce, South Australian MP Tony Pasin,

Tasmanian senator Jonathon Duniam, West Australian MPs Rick Wilson and Ian Goodenough, and Queensland Nationals MPs Ken O’Dowd and Barry O’Sullivan.

New LNP senator Amanda Stoker said yesterday she had made “no commitment” to the Monash Forum after being named as a member. Nationals MP Michelle Landry denied knowing anything about the group after being linked to it.



Kevin Andrews. Picture: Josie Hayden

Mr Christensen last week sent a message to Nationals MPs asking them to join.

“We are setting up a new group called the Monash Forum encouraging the government in the promotion of and - facilitation of and/or construction of coal-fired power stations,” he wrote. “Why Monash? Because he opened the La Trobe coal reserves and oversaw the construction of coal-fired power there.”

Mr Christensen said there needed to be more federal government support for coal-fired power. He said the government should “secure” Liddell power station in the NSW Upper Hunter and then expand the baseload network.

“I think that there is a strong desire within the backbench for the government to get more actively involved in the

construction of reliable, around-the-clock baseload power,” Mr Christensen said. “Most of us haven’t bought into the great green lie that that is going to be achieved by solar with batteries or wind power. Those products have their place but they do not supply affordable, around-the-clock, secure, baseload power. The only thing in the Australian market that does that is coal-fired power.”

When asked if the forum’s requests would be possible within the framework of the NEG, Mr Christensen said: “We are told the NEG is technologically neutral ... within those parameters the best solution currently available to us is coal-fired power”.



George Christensen.

Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg said yesterday the government's policy was technology-neutral.

He said independent modelling by the Energy Security Board had suggested coal would make up more than half of the energy mix in 2030. In its advice to government in October, the ESB said renewables were likely to reach 28 to 36 per cent of the energy mix by 2030 under the NEG — with wind and solar providing 18 to 24 per cent.

The NEG is aimed at guaranteeing energy reliability, while lowering costs for consumers and delivering on Australia's Paris Agreement commitment to reducing carbon emissions by 26 per cent on 2005 levels. It will put an obligation on electricity retailers to buy power at a set level of emissions intensity each year to meet a 2030 reduction target — set by government — for the power generation sector while also forcing retailers to meet a percentage of demand from reliable power generation.

*Additional reporting: Ben Packham*

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