

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Tony Abbott threatens to cross the floor on NEG

Abbott leads backbench criticism of Frydenberg's energy policy0:49

Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg is adamant he has the support of the party room for his government's key energy policy. It comes after a parliament meeting yesterday where Tony Abbott led backbench criticism of the National Energy Guarantee. The Former Prime Minister has told the Daily Telegraph that briefings against him are causing potentially fatal damage to the party's electoral chances, which Mr Frydenberg has steadfastly disputed.



Tony Abbott. Picture: Kym Smith
Joe Kelly, The Australian, 5:35PM June 20, 2018

Tony Abbott has held out the threat of MPs crossing the floor to vote against the national energy guarantee, warning Malcolm Turnbull not to ignore the Coalition backbench and accusing the government of outsourcing its policy to the Labor premiers.

The former prime minister made his strongest comments to date against the government's signature energy plan after seven Coalition MPs yesterday spoke against it in the joint party room meeting.

Speaking on Ben Fordham's 2GB radio program, Mr Abbott repeatedly refused to rule out crossing the floor. He said that Coalition MPs could not "be expected to support a policy that will continue to drive prices up". He also warned that the energy guarantee was more about achieving emissions' reductions than providing power bill relief to households, warning that Mr

Turnbull was mismanaging party-room meetings to dismiss the concerns of his own MPs.

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Pressed on whether he would cross the floor to vote against the national energy guarantee, Mr Abbott said: "I hope it's not going to come to that". "I really do hope that it's not going to come to that. But I do think that the executive government needs to understand that you can't take the party room for granted," he said. "I think there's been a bit of that — a bit of taking the party room for granted.

"For instance, the Prime Minister has developed this practice of discussing legislation at enormous length at every party room meeting before we actually get to backbenchers' questions and comments. "Now this is completely unprecedented. When John Howard was the leader, when I was the leader, when Malcolm Turnbull was the leader the last time around, when Brendan Nelson was the leader we always went straight from the leadership statement to the backbench questions and comments."

Craig Kelly also told The Australian he would not rule out crossing the floor. "The party room is not a rubber stamp," Mr Kelly said. "The party room can never be taken for granted. Obviously this legislation like all others should go through the normal procedures." Pressed on whether he could cross the floor Mr Kelly said: "Every single member of the Coalition, under the principles of the party ... has the right to cross the floor on any piece of legislation". "The Prime Minister has exercised that right before. My predecessor Danna Vale exercised that right. I know the former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce exercised that right on many occasions." "It is a privileged right that is only used in very extreme circumstances."

Mr Abbott said that this was a "fundamental failure of process" and argued it was "stifling the proper debate that we should be able to have inside our party room". He argued that the government spent an "enormous amount of time" negotiating with the crossbench, but warned the backbench was being ignored.

"I reckon the government needs to spend a bit more time talking to the backbench. "Yes, the crossbench in the Senate is important. Don't forget the

backbench, because you are only in government because you've got a backbench that's prepared to support your legislation.

“Now I hope it doesn't come to questions of crossing the floor — I really do. It's not something that any Liberal would lightly do. But I don't think we can be expected to support a policy that will continue to drive prices up and which will deny our industries the affordable 24/7 power that they need for jobs to continue.”



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Picture: Kym Smith

Mr Abbott argued that power prices would not come down unless the government was able to get “more affordable baseload power into the system”. “My other difficulty with all of this is that by saying that we've got to get this thing through COAG we're essentially subcontracting our energy policy ... to the Labor premiers,” he said. “This is a pretty big step. I know that business wants certainty. But the only certainty we're going to get is something that the Labor Party will accept and what the Labor Party is on about is an even more furious version of emissions reduction than the government.”

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