

Treatment of Michael Sukkar ignites fury in Liberal Party



Michael Sukkar with Scott Morrison in parliament earlier this month. Picture: AAP

Simon Benson, 12:00AM August 29, 2018

There are some good appointments among Scott Morrison's first ministry, there are some highly questionable appointments and there is one glaringly obvious omission — which isn't Tony Abbott.

For conservatives, Morrison's decision to bench the Victorian MP and leading figure in the national conservatives, Michael Sukkar, smacks of payback. It also reveals an underlying and inherited structural weakness to Morrison's leadership.

Julia Banks' claims of bullying and intimidation amid last week's leadership spill have drawn a swift, stern warning from the new PM.

Morrison is not a tribal conservative. He presents as an unaligned Centre-Right pragmatist. But he runs with the NSW moderates. This might make his leadership appealing to a broader internal constituency — the so-called consensus candidate — but also renders it potentially unstable.

The top-line take-out from the new ministry is that the moderates have been rewarded, with NSW progressive Marise Payne elevated to foreign affairs,

having been accused of being invisible in defence, and South Australian wet Christopher Pyne moving up to take Payne's previous role.

South Australian moderate Simon Birmingham also seems to have been rewarded for starting a war with the Catholic education sector by being promoted to Trade Minister and deputy Senate leader, leaving Victorian conservative Dan Tehan to fix a monumental mess in education.

One senior Liberal Party figure described it all as "comical": a "Turnbull 2.0" cabinet.

Conservatives were certainly elevated, notably NSW MP Angus Taylor, but there is no doubt Sukkar was a victim of demands on Morrison from the moderates — a sacrifice to the gods.

The treatment of Sukkar, who commanded the largest swing towards him of any Liberal MP at the 2016 election, has already ignited fury among the Victorian Liberal Party, including in its administrative committee, the majority of whom are now aligned to him. The decision to put him in the freezer reveals a dangerous lack of understanding of the Victorian branch, which has been in a slow purge of moderates for some time.

Fellow Victorian, friend and now Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, who as an ally of Sukkar is aligned to a grouping that includes ministers Greg Hunt and Alan Tudge, is feeling the heat.

Members of the executive, including president Michael Kroger, are filthy.

Sukkar is considered by most in the Coalition partyroom as a rising star. He was applauded for delivering significant reforms in the housing sector when assistant minister to Morrison when he was treasurer. In this context, the claim that the cabinet is now a meritocracy is questionable when unknowns are promoted from obscurity into cabinet and friends such as Stuart Robert are returned from exile.

It already appears there have been terms and conditions imposed on Morrison's leadership by the moderates, such as keeping Abbott out of cabinet.

To survive as Prime Minister and return the government to a winnable position, Morrison must do what Turnbull failed to do: unite the party.

And one of the fundamental problems of the Turnbull administration was that his was a cabinet controlled by moderates trying to govern on behalf of a party whose majority was still conservative.

Sukkar allies claim this as the first misstep of Morrison's leadership.