

Tony Abbott calls for Liberal voter unity



Liberal Party strategists are factoring in using Tony Abbott during the election campaign next year in areas where he is popular — particularly Queensland and possibly WA. Picture: AAP exclusive

Dennis Shanahan, POLITICAL EDITOR, 11:00PM October 26, 2018

Tony Abbott has called on Liberal voters to get behind Scott Morrison and overcome the anger of two sitting prime ministers being dumped, in a bid to unite the party before the next federal election.

Mr Abbott's intervention came amid calls from former prime minister John Howard and Dave Sharma, the losing Liberal candidate in Wentworth, for the Coalition's warring factions to make peace and work towards pragmatic compromise on policy.

The push for unity and support for Mr Morrison comes a week after the Liberals' devastating loss in the Wentworth by-election and conflicting demands from rival Coalition factions on energy and immigration. Speaking in the joint partyroom in Canberra this week, Mr Morrison told colleagues he would not lurch to the Right or Left and play "hokey-pokey politics" in a panic after the loss of Wentworth, which had been in Coalition hands for 117 years.

Mr Abbott, who was removed as prime minister by Malcolm Turnbull in 2015 and accused of destabilising his successor's government, yesterday pledged to do "whatever I can for the re-election of the Scott Morrison-led Coalition government". "We can yearn for 'what was' but we have to choose 'what is' and a Scott Morrison-led Coalition over a Bill Shorten-led Labor government is a no-brainer," Mr Abbott told *The Weekend Australian*. "My message to people wringing their hands about the state of the country and the polity is that there is a choice and the clearly better choice is Scott Morrison. "There is no doubt in my mind and there should be no doubt in the minds of people who supported me as prime minister and who supported Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister that the better choice is Scott Morrison."

Liberal Party strategists are factoring in using Mr Abbott during the election campaign next year in areas where he is popular — particularly Queensland and possibly Western Australia — as the party finalises preselections and federal-state co-ordination.

Mr Howard and Mr Sharma, both writing in *The Weekend Australian* today, say that more considered focus on policy and less factional sparring is imperative for a Coalition election win next year.

Mr Morrison met with Queensland Coalition MPs and senators on Wednesday to plan a blitz in the northern electoral battleground where Newspoll surveys suggest the government could lose at least 10 seats.

With the Coalition trailing Labor in Newspoll 53-47 per cent on the two-party-preferred vote, Mr Abbott said he would do "everything I can" to help Mr Morrison win the election, which is due to be held by May next year. Mr Abbott is also set for a battle to retain his northern Sydney seat of Warringah, which faces Wentworth from the northern side of Sydney Harbour, and where he will face a strong independent challenge. "I'm not underestimating the challenges in my electorate of Warringah, I never have and expect to face a similar campaign as I did in 2001 from a strong independent challenger," he said. "As a former prime minister still in parliament, I have used a megaphone pretty effectively on the issues of population and power and I want to use that megaphone to help the government be re-elected."

Mr Howard, who campaigned strongly in Wentworth as a former Liberal prime minister, in contrast to Mr Turnbull who refused to campaign publicly for Mr Sharma as his successor in the seat, said the "broad church" of the Liberal

Party “best succeeds” when its conservative and liberal elements operate - together. “It stumbles when one or other strand stakes a greater claim to the party’s soul,” Mr Howard says in an article published in The Weekend Australian today.

“I am confident that Scott Morrison holds strongly to this belief. The party I hold dear must have a widely based appeal, which rejects special interest groups and always projects a sense of balance.

“This, and an emphasis on the central role of the family, as well as the place of small business in the life of the nation, is most likely to deliver political - success.”

Mr Sharma, writing in The Weekend Australian today, said there was no doubt the single greatest factor in the 18 per cent swing against the Liberals in Wentworth was the removal of Mr Turnbull, “a popular and highly regarded local member”. “It was a move that was deeply resented by the electorate, who found it appalling,” Mr Sharma writes. “Political instability in Canberra over the past 10 years has eroded public trust in politics, made it harder to develop good long-term policy, and even lessened our international - credibility.”

Mr Sharma, who is expected to run again for the Liberals at the next election, said another lesson from the Wentworth by-election was that politicians must make pragmatic decisions and not fight over ideology. “Australians want their politicians to go about methodically addressing challenges and crafting pragmatic solutions, rather than engaging in needless ideological warfare,” he said.

Mr Abbott, referring to his removal as Liberal leader in 2015 and Mr Turnbull’s removal three months ago, said: “People who regard themselves as Liberal voters who are dismayed and disappointed with the events of the last three years must grit our teeth and vote for the better choice of the Scott Morrison-led Coalition over the Bill Shorten-led Labor Party.

“In the end, an election is less about striking a pose than choosing a government. “No government is going to appeal to every single voter but when it comes to a choice between Morrison and Shorten it is a no-brainer.”

Dennis Shanahan