

## Senior Liberals desert Turnbull after early poll push



Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull leaves his house at Point Piper in Sydney yesterday, as he continues to comment on the state of the Liberal Party. Picture: AAP

Greg Brown, Journalist, Andrew Clennell, NSW Political Editor, 11:00PM  
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Malcolm Turnbull finds himself isolated from the Liberal Party's most influential powerbrokers and senior MPs after his attempt to embarrass the Prime Minister failed.

The ousted prime minister was scorned by Liberals yesterday — including moderates — in the wake of his brazen bid to block Scott Morrison over preselections and try to force an early election.

Former NSW premier Nick Greiner, who was Mr Turnbull's pick for Liberal Party federal president, told The Australian Mr Turnbull's interventions were "certainly not helpful and it wouldn't appear to have been intended to be helpful".

Malcolm Turnbull is taking a very prime ministerial approach to life outside The Lodge, since losing the job three months ago.

Former Victorian Liberal premier Jeff Kennett said Mr Turnbull's actions since losing his job revealed the former Wentworth MP, whose seat was lost to independent Kerryn Phelps, was "all about Malcolm". "It has never been about party, it has never been about friendship, it has never been about country, it is all about Malcolm and it is very sad," Mr Kennett said. "He has turned his back on (the party) in the most personal and spiteful way."

After receiving questions from The Australian, the former prime minister admitted on Sunday night he lobbied members of the state executive to defy a request by the Prime Minister to save conservative Craig Kelly from losing a preselection contest for his Sydney seat. Mr Turnbull suggested yesterday that Mr Morrison should cop the wrath of voters and "brand damage" as a result of the leadership change, instead of NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

"There is a real concern in NSW Liberal circles that a very good, outstanding government led by Gladys Berejiklian is going to have its prospects of success diminished because of the brand damage to the Liberal Party caused by the leadership change in August," Mr Turnbull said. He declined to deny on five - occasions during a radio interview that he had told NSW moderate leader Matt Kean: "We should force Scott to an early election because all he's about is keeping his arse on C1", referring to the prime minister's commonwealth car.

Moderates on the NSW Liberal Party state executive backed away yesterday from their previous opposition to cancel preselections for sitting MPs after Mr Turnbull's conversations became public.

Moderates who had planned to vote against Mr Morrison's preselection proposal — Chris Rath, Sally Betts, Wayne Brown and Harry Stutchbury — agreed to abstain but did not support the ballot that protected Mr Kelly from being challenged by moderate NSW Liberal Party vice-president Kent Johns.

North Sydney MP Trent Zimmerman, a former key Turnbull backer, said Mr Turnbull's intervention had forced moderates to allow the cancellation of preselections, handing Mr Kelly the party's endorsement for the seat of Hughes. "Malcolm's intervention meant that it did become an issue about the Prime Minister's authority," Mr Zimmerman told the ABC. "I think Malcolm's intervention made it hard for the executive to do anything other than they did."

As Mr Morrison attempts to secure clear air in the lead-up to the Christmas break, Mr Turnbull will continue a series of public appearances, delivering a speech and Q&A today at the NSW Smart Energy Summit in Sydney.

The Australian understands his presence at the summit has angered senior government figures, with Smart Energy Council chief executive John Grimes considered one of the key pro-renewable agitators who attacked the NEG. "His (Grimes's) comments about the NEG are on the public record," a senior MP said.

The former prime minister, who wrote a letter in May supporting Mr Kelly's preselection, said he intended to hold a federal election on March 2 when he was leading the country and the date was supported by Mr Morrison, who last week flagged a May election. Cabinet ministers said yesterday no election date had been set during Mr Turnbull's leadership.

Splits also emerged yesterday inside the powerful NSW moderate faction, with state and federal MPs declaring "terminal" Mr Zimmerman's leadership of the group, which helped Mr Morrison beat Mr Dutton for the leadership. "The moderates are furious with Trent and Kean, the two of them are gone as factional leaders. That is the end of it. It is one too many idiotic factional deals," a federal MP said. A state moderate MP said Mr Zimmerman's leadership was "in tatters" and he should resign. "We are going to lose the federal election ... why did we give Craig Kelly another three years?"