

Ex-Liberal Julia Banks snubs event to woo new supporters



Julia Banks at the Red Hill Market.
exclusive

Greg Brown, Journalist, Simon Benson, National Affairs Editor, 12:00AM February 6, 2019
150 Comments

Independent Julia Banks snubbed the biggest annual event in her Melbourne electorate of Chisholm, choosing instead to go “on the hustings” to a winery and film festival in the Liberal seaside electorate of Flinders that she has chosen to contest at the next election.

The Liberal turncoat was a notable absentee from Saturday’s Chinese New Year Festival in Melbourne’s Box Hill, attended by Scott Morrison, Bill Shorten and Daniel Andrews and organised by the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse.

The Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader and the Victorian Premier made speeches at the event but the local member was 80km away on the Mornington Peninsula, tweeting about the “local community atmosphere” at a film festival sponsored by energy giant AGL.

AGL is proposing to build a gas terminal in Flinders, which is up against strong community opposition, including by the sitting MP, Health Minister Greg Hunt.

Ms Banks quit the Liberal Party late last year after the leadership turmoil that resulted in Malcolm Turnbull resigning as leader on August 24. The Chisholm

MP made unsubstantiated claims that she was bullied over her strong support for Mr Turnbull.

Mr Hunt supported challenger Peter Dutton in the leadership spill.

Former Chisholm MP Anna Burke said it was “disrespectful” to Ms Banks’ current constituents that she did not attend the event. Ms Burke, a Labor MP who represented Chisholm for 18 years until Ms Banks’s election in 2016, said she never missed the event during her time in politics. “I even went last year when I wasn’t a member,” Ms Burke said. “It is the largest event in the electorate. It is celebrated by the Chinese community, and the wider community benefit from the Chinese businesses in the area. “It brings lots of people into the eastern suburbs and I think (Ms Banks’s absence) shows disrespect to the community overall.”

The furore over her absence came as Liberal Party federal president Nick Greiner criticised Mr Turnbull for suggesting in an interview that Ms Banks was an “outstanding parliamentarian”. Mr Greiner, a former NSW premier who was the former prime minister’s pick for party president, said Mr Turnbull should “follow his own advice” about the behaviour of former prime ministers after they leave politics.

Since announcing last week that she would run against Mr Hunt, Ms Banks has shared social media posts attending events on the Morning Peninsula, but none in her current seat. On Saturday, the day of the Chinese New Year event that she missed, Ms Banks shared a tweet about hitting the “hustings in the new electorate”.

Ms Burke, the former speaker of the House of Representatives, said Ms Banks was being paid a good taxpayer-funded salary — \$207,000 — to represent the constituents of Chisholm. “She is being paid as the representative of Chisholm, that is what she is being paid for at the moment,” she said. “If she wants, she can retire from parliament now and run as a candidate. But her responsibility at the moment is to the electorate of Chisholm.”

Ms Banks was given two additional personal staff from the Prime Minister’s pool on becoming an independent following new protocols introduced by Julia Gillard, which gave independents more resources than non-ministerial members of parliament. The two personal staff are free to be directed by Ms Banks to perform campaign tasks as they are not treated in the same way as

electoral staff. However, the rules pertaining to electoral staff working on campaigns in electorates other than the ones they are assigned to are unclear.

A senior government source said it was unprecedented for a former Liberal MP to use staff given to her by a Coalition government to campaign as an independent against the party of government under which that MP was originally elected.

Mr Turnbull, who refused to campaign with Liberal candidate Dave Sharma during last year's Wentworth by-election, said he respected Ms Banks's decision to leave the Liberal Party. "Julia Banks is an outstanding parliamentarian. She came to parliament with life experience as a lawyer and in the business world. She is really an outstanding representative," Mr Turnbull said.

"I believe the people of Flinders will have a very stimulating contest between her and Greg Hunt and no doubt the other candidates."

Ms Banks did not respond to questions from The Australian.