

**End of the line for Pyne: The Liberal veteran, said to be the “master of the double doublecross”, has more enemies inside his party than outside it.**



Defence Minister Christopher Pyne on Friday begins his staged farewell from politics in time for the coming election in May. Picture: Matt Loxton

Brad Norington, From Inquirer, March 3, 2019  
171 Comments

As Liberal insiders admit, the optics are not helpful. Perhaps even terrible. It feeds Bill Shorten’s claims about ministers leaving a sinking ship when more announce departures so close to the federal election in May.

Julie Bishop, Kelly O’Dwyer, Michael Keenan, Nigel Scullion, Steve Ciobo and most likely former minister Craig Laundry — all headed for the exit door.

But Christopher Pyne? The Defence Minister, too, is throwing it all away, confirming at the weekend that he will go at the election. The hyper-ambitious Pyne is still just 51 and could have a big future in Canberra if he wanted it. When explaining his decision to quit, Pyne said he had spent half his life in

politics. True enough. He was elected to parliament at 26, one of the youngest MPs.

Liberal Party blood has pumped through Pyne's veins since his teens. Bright, brash and brimming with confidence, he could have risen up the ranks quicker, yet prime minister John Howard held him back.

Some of Pyne's recent performances during parliamentary question time suggest he hasn't lost any of his spark. He has demolished Labor opposition attacks when the government has appeared otherwise flat-footed.

Pyne has become the Liberal moderates' go-to faction leader on the national scene, his influence extending far beyond his home state of South Australia.

Supporters of Pyne believed he could make it all the way to the top, and perhaps he too did at one stage. Yet old battles were taking their toll and could have been a contributing factor as he says it is time to go, seeking a second career outside politics.

#### Conflict and betrayal

Pyne's bitter conflicts with party elders in his state, chiefly Nick Minchin and his allies on the Liberals' Right, have been the stuff of party legend. The enemies, and debts owed, have continued mounting. Even old friend Julie Bishop seems embittered, claiming yesterday that Pyne was involved in a behind-the-scenes "plot" to swing votes she was likely to receive to Scott Morrison in the leadership contest in August to replace Malcolm Turnbull.

Pyne used to be very friendly with Tony Abbott: the pair once dined weekly when in Canberra, and Pyne allegedly said he was loyal to Abbott and would remain so until the end of his days as prime minister. Abbott felt deeply disappointed, betrayed, when Pyne turned against him.

As Abbott supporters are quick to point out, any outward display of loyalty from Pyne was trashed overnight when he backed Turnbull in the September 2015 coup to depose Abbott.

Ask Cory Bernardi about Pyne and the answers will be as swift as they are brutal. They went to school together, lived in the same Adelaide street as kids and worked together in university politics. But the alleged duplicity of Pyne, for

Bernardi, rates close to the top of reasons he quit as a Liberal Party senator and decided to sit as a conservative independent.

Through the years, Pyne has had a disarming tactic to survive and thrive. Liberals hostile to their own self-described party fixer say it boils down to two words: deny everything. Pyne would disagree but he has often dismissed uncomfortable claims directed his way as fabrications, lies — even entire conversations that never happened.

It is a ploy that served the sharp-tongued Liberal well for much of his long political career but especially as a key ally of Turnbull, who promoted him in a pre-Christmas 2017 reshuffle to the defence industry portfolio. Morrison, on becoming Prime Minister, promoted him to the top as Defence Minister.

#### Double double-cross

Pyne has controlled South Australia's dominant Liberal moderates faction for years with such a firm grip that, according to insiders, Liberal Premier Steven Marshall and his parliamentary team have often sought Pyne's approval on personnel and other decisions. Pyne controls the party's state executive, it is said. These too are claims that Pyne dismisses as being "without foundation".

But there is no doubt Pyne's influence does extend far outside his state via alliances with federal Liberal Trent Zimmerman in NSW and previously with the now departed George Brandis in Queensland. The numbers Pyne controlled did help make, or break, party leaders. As a politician with more enemies inside his party than outside it, allegations that Pyne was the "master of the double doublecross" and "utterly ruthless" in his quest to win at all costs had become louder and more numerous in recent years.

The Australian's columnist Janet Albrechtsen wrote in November 2017, when Turnbull was still riding high as PM, that Pyne had allegedly sought to undermine the Liberal candidate in the seat of Barker for the 2013 federal - election. Pyne was accused of making a phone call to Peter Gandolfi, the mayor of Wattle Range Council in the Barker electorate, on Saturday, June 22, 2013, asking him to run as an independent in the coming federal election against the Liberal Party's endorsed candidate, Tony Pasi.

At that point Pasi and Gandolfi were "at loggerheads" over local issues and not speaking. Pasi was no ally of Pyne's because he belonged to the rival conservative group. "Will you run?" Pyne is alleged to have asked Gandolfi.

When Gandolfi declined, Pyne reportedly expressed his frustration: “Why not?”

Pasin went on to win Barker in 2013 and became a backbencher in the Abbott government, unaware of a possible inside job to block his path to Canberra. He won Barker again in 2016.

A year later, circumstances had changed dramatically, with Gandolfi and Pasin becoming friends. Gandolfi declined to comment publicly about the alleged entreaty from Pyne, although he reportedly “did not dispute” it when asked by an Adelaide-based online publication, InDaily, after Albrechtsen’s story first - surfaced.

Pasin was not coy, telling The Australian how he learned about Pyne’s alleged attempt to stop him winning Barker for the Liberals. “The person who told me said, ‘Mate, I’m about to tell you something that is going to rock your world.’ The person expected me to be shocked,” he said. “Sadly, I wasn’t shocked - because I have witnessed attempts to damage career prospects of young conservatives over a long period of time. I have become all too familiar with this kind of Machiavellian behaviour.”

Pyne was quick to deny the accusation. He said he’d never suggested to anyone “that they run as an independent against the Liberal Party”. He’d spoken to Gandolfi many times over the years, he said, but had no recollection of calling him on the day in question.

End of the story? Not quite. Stuart Andrew, president of the Liberals’ federal electoral convention in Pasin’s seat of Barker, lodged an official complaint to the party’s state executive because it would be “disrespectful” not to conduct an investigation. The accusation against Pyne was potentially political dynamite: alleged behaviour that could force Pyne’s expulsion under party rules if proven to be true.

At the time of the alleged phone call to Gandolfi in June 2013, Pyne was the leader of opposition business. Abbott was on the cusp of taking the Coalition to victory and unseating Julia Gillard as Labor prime minister. The Andrew complaint against Pyne — by then a senior minister — was handled quickly by the Liberals’ state executive in Adelaide and dismissed unanimously. Pyne was reported to be “cleared” of any misconduct, and he was cocky in his response:

“I’ve always supported the endorsed Liberal candidate, which is more than those Liberals can say who supported Michael Pratt against me in 1993.”

### Long memory

The relevance of Pyne’s reference to Pratt, a former Liberal who ran against him as an independent in Sturt almost a quarter-century ago, was cryptic, although it shows Pyne has a long memory. He was just 25 years old, making his run for parliament in 1993, and a staffer to long-time Sturt MP Ian Wilson. Pyne said he’d support Wilson for another term and pledged loyalty to his boss in a vote to retain Liberal preselection for the seat.

When another Liberal stood against Wilson, Pyne pounced. He stood in the preselection and defeated a stunned Wilson. “It was a classic trick, using a stalking horse,” claimed one Liberal source familiar with the preselection - contest. “Christopher had pioneered this sort of manoeuvre in Young Liberals.”

One concern expressed by Canberra colleagues about Pyne in Defence has been the amount of taxpayer money flowing into Adelaide for the government’s \$50 billion submarine contract and naval shipbuilding projects. Critics claim the largesse has benefited Pyne’s electoral backyard. Pyne and his supporters dismiss such claims, pointing to his “incredible” achievements in setting up Australia’s defence capability for the future.

Pyne told *The Australian* he had supporters on the Liberal Party’s conservative side, no matter what Bernardi or other critics might say. He recommended that *The Australian* speak to Finance Minister Mathias Cormann and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, and they obliged.

Cormann said he and Pyne obviously came from different traditions in the Liberal Party but insisted the pair had a “close and trusting” working relationship and Pyne had made a “significant positive contribution” to Australia, especially in securing the nation’s defence capability requirements. On whether Pyne polarised people, Cormann said: “Christopher can play it particularly hard, which is also what makes him so effective against the Labor Party.”

Dutton said the Howard government had worked most effectively with a cross-section of party views at the cabinet table, including Pyne allies Amanda Vanstone and Robert Hill. So it was with Pyne. “I’ve always worked effectively with Christopher,” he said. “Like me, he comes from a marginal seat. He has a

good read on politics and campaigning, and he has a pragmatic, not ideological, approach to the government's agenda."

Pyne's quarter-century in parliament is almost up but no one expects him to disappear.

-'Most untrustworthy person in the business'

It might not surprise anyone that Liberal defector Cory Bernardi has branded Christopher Pyne "the most untrustworthy person in the business", considering the long-running feud between them. But Bernardi, now leader of his own Australian Conservatives party, seizes on one incident in their past, when they still spoke, as evidence of Pyne's alleged ruthlessness and absence of political beliefs.

During an informal golf game, he claims Pyne once told him he could have stood for Labor, and ran as a Liberal only because he lived in a Liberal seat.

Pyne denied the accusation when Bernardi first raised it publicly on his blog in 2009. The latter's refusal to apologise cost him his job when Turnbull, first time round as Liberal leader, stuck with Pyne and sacked Bernardi from the frontbench. Bernardi says he warned Tony Abbott about Pyne years ago but he would not listen: "I said to Abbott, you may say he's OK because you think you can trust him 80 per cent of the time — but what about the other 20 per cent?"

Pyne was blunt to The Australian, dismissing anything Bernardi says. "He was elected as a Liberal (at the July 2016 federal election) and left within months of doing so — in effect a 'cuckoo in someone else's nest'."

John Howard was wary of Pyne from early on, keeping the SA Liberal moderate on the backbench for years when he was prime minister. Howard was close politically to Nick Minchin, a former SA party director and Pyne's factional nemesis. Minchin's views carried weight. It did not help either that the then 20-something Pyne told Howard to his face that he was "yesterday's man" when Howard made his comeback and replaced Alexander Downer for the 1996 election.

"Yesterday's man" became PM for 11 years. Howard elevated Pyne to minister for ageing less than 12 months before the Coalition lost office to Labor in 2007.  
Brad Norington