

Coalition angst as Turnbull plays invisible hand



Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in Sydney yesterday. Picture: John Feder exclusive

Andrew Clennell, NSW Political Editor, Joe Kelly, Political Reporter
11:00PM November 28, 2018

Malcolm Turnbull has been in regular contact with Kerryn Phelps and one of his staff members helped the independent MP, who played a key role in counselling Julia Banks before her shock defection from the Liberal Party. The Australian can reveal the former prime minister has been messaging Dr Phelps, the independent who claimed his seat of Wentworth, and a former electorate office staffer worked for his successor for three days as part of a “handover”.

Former Coalition colleagues last night expressed ongoing concern over the support Mr Turnbull has given Dr Phelps, after he was unwilling to provide public backing to Liberal candidate Dave Sharma during the Wentworth by-election campaign.

It also emerged yesterday that Ms Banks, a friend and supporter of the former prime minister, consulted with Dr Phelps for weeks before abandoning Scott Morrison’s government. A senior Liberal source said they believed that Mr Turnbull was advising Dr Phelps on strategy and that “his hands are all over the Julia Banks” resignation.

“He is consumed by bringing down the government,” the Liberal source said.

A Liberal MP last night questioned whether Mr Turnbull had assisted Dr Phelps to help “win the seat against the Liberal Party and a candidate whose preselection he had endorsed”. Another said the contact between Dr Phelps and Mr Turnbull “speaks for itself and confirms everybody’s suspicions”, adding that “there are suspicions he is in contact with others”.

Mr Turnbull took to Twitter this morning to say he is not behind the Coalition’s crossbench woes. “Attribution bias — blaming others for the consequences of your own actions is a common symptom of paranoia,” he wrote. “Imagining “invisible” people are out to get you is also a classic symptom. Not often on the front page of course...”

Approached by The Australian at a crossbench Christmas party last night, Ms Banks declined to comment on whether Mr Turnbull had been in contact with her, or whether she sought his advice before defecting from the Liberal Party, plunging the Coalition further into minority government. The Australian understands Ms Banks consulted the three female independent MPs — Cathy McGowan, Rebekha Sharkie and Dr Phelps — in the weeks leading up to her resignation.

Julie Bishop, who yesterday confirmed her intention to recontest her seat of Curtin at next year’s election, also attended the crossbench function, posing for photographs with Bill Shorten, Ms Banks, Dr Phelps and Ms Sharkie. Ms Bishop, who yesterday refused to say if Peter Dutton’s eligibility to sit in parliament should be tested, has continued to leave open the possibility of another leadership tilt.

Adding to the party’s woes, NSW Liberal MP Craig Kelly last night would not rule out a move to the crossbench if he lost the preselection contest for his seat of Hughes and confirmed he was being urged to immediately resign as a Liberal MP.

Ms Bishop, who this week called on the Coalition to revive Mr Turnbull’s national energy guarantee, which Mr Morrison has declared “dead”, said she found out about Ms Banks’ resignation after the Chisholm MP made her statement in parliament.

Ms Banks, a close ally of Mr Turnbull and Ms Bishop, did not inform Mr Morrison ahead of her decision to quit the party.

Dr Phelps's office, which includes former Labor adviser Darrin Barnett, said yesterday Mr Turnbull had been in text message contact with his successor. The Australian has been told Mr Turnbull has messaged Dr Phelps as many as four or five times a day since she was elected and that he had offered her advice. Mr Barnett said Mr Turnbull's messages were about protecting the interests of his former constituents, including sporting clubs and the like.

"She has been in touch with him, but certainly not several times a day; not daily and it's been almost exclusively about constituency matters," Mr Barnett told The Australian. "He just wanted a smooth transition for his EO (electorate office)." Mr Barnett said one staff member stayed on for "three to four days" to help with the transition. Dr Phelps took over Mr Turnbull's electorate office.

Dr Phelps won Wentworth after Mr Turnbull's retirement from parliament by 1860 votes. Many believe the deciding factor was a refusal by Mr Turnbull to pen a message of support on letterhead or social media for Mr Sharma, despite requests from Mr Morrison to do so. Mr Sharma is being encouraged by Liberal powerbrokers to run again for the seat at the next federal election. Dr Phelps hired Mr Barnett, a former staffer to Julia Gillard and a Labor campaign operative, as her by-election campaign spokesman. He is now on Dr Phelps's permanent staff.

Mr Turnbull's son Alex broadcast a message on social media before the Wentworth poll urging a vote for anyone except the Liberals. Mr Turnbull, who was approached for comment about his communication with Dr Phelps and allegations he had a role in Ms Banks' resignation, last night defended his moderate allies, saying they played no hand in blowing up his "centrist government".