

'Sold down the river': Leaked emails show Liberal Party moderates under fire for saving Craig Kelly

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Kylar Loussikian

Malcolm Turnbull's intervention in a fight over the future of Craig Kelly has sparked a war inside the NSW Liberal Party's dominant moderate wing, with its leadership accused of capitulating to conservatives.

A blistering email obtained by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* reveals the decision by factional leaders Trent Zimmerman and Matt Kean to support Prime Minister Scott Morrison's plan to rescue Mr Kelly from certain preselection defeat has triggered bitter recriminations.



Malcolm Turnbull has criticised the Liberal party's plans to automatically preselect Craig Kelly after he allegedly threatened to go to the crossbench and run as an independent if he's dumped.

In a late-night missive on Monday, Sally Betts — a close ally of the former prime minister — attacked Mr Zimmerman and Mr Kean for helping save Mr Kelly, a conservative backbencher who helped bring down the National Energy Guarantee and Mr Turnbull's leadership.

"To say that the moderates are disappointed in you, as our supposed leader, is an understatement," she wrote to the North Sydney MP.

"You supported Kelly - a thug, a bully, and a disgrace and you need to explain that to the moderates.

"You were happy to sell the moderates down the river and not even ask for anything for our vote ... how many other deals are you going to do that disadvantage the moderates?

"And I am telling you that you have no authority to speak for me or anyone else ever again. I doubt if the majority of the moderates want you to speak for them either."



Sally Betts is a former staffer to Malcolm Turnbull and a local councillor. CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY

The comments were also circulated to a wide group of people including Mr Turnbull and influential lobbyist Michael Photios, who handed the leadership of the faction to Mr Zimmerman and Mr Kean last year.

Mr Kelly was facing defeat by local councillor Kent Johns, a moderate-aligned party operator who had the numbers to win the nomination for the safe southern Sydney seat of Hughes.

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In a separate email sent to Ms Betts and Mr Zimmerman on Tuesday, Mr Johns made numerous references to problems within Mr Kelly's office and wrote: "This was never about political ambition, this was about fixing the office in Hughes and our faction failed".

"Even if as moderates we don't stand for anything philosophically any more you might have thought we had a moral spine," he added.

Ms Betts, NSW Young Liberals president Harry Stutchbury and moderate powerbroker Chris Rath abstained from voting against Mr Kelly's re-endorsement — a crucial decision which allowed him to remain the party's candidate in the safe Sydney seat of Hughes at the next federal election.

Mr Morrison personally telephoned Ms Betts to lobby her over fears Mr Kelly would quit the Liberal Party and move to the crossbench had he lost preselection.



Liberal MP Craig Kelly in Parliament this week. CREDIT: DOMINIC LORRIMER

In contrast, Mr Turnbull spent much of Sunday calling state executive members urging them to resist the pressure and likened the plot to save Mr Kelly to giving in to blackmail.

In a radio interview on Monday, Mr Zimmerman said Mr Turnbull's intervention effectively gave the state executive no choice but to back Mr Morrison.

"Malcolm's intervention meant it did become an issue about the Prime Minister's authority and that swung the dial in favour of acceding to the request the Prime Minister had made."

In her email, Ms Betts challenged Mr Zimmerman's claim that moderates abstained because of Mr Turnbull's public statements: "How dare you speak for us ... that is simply untrue."

Mr Kelly said he was "more than happy to have a preselection, and I'd be happy to run on my record".

"There is no other MP who sits in the party room that has moved a seat up the pendulum as far as I have," he said, in reference to the margin in Hughes.



Mr Zimmerman and Mr Johns declined to comment. Mr Kean could not be reached.

When contacted, Ms Betts said she was disappointed state executive members "were even asked to vote" to support Mr Kelly.

"I am a loyal servant of the moderates and the Liberals, and it is upsetting that my personal comments were leaked," Ms Betts said.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/sold-down-the-river-leaked-emails-show-liberal-party-moderates-under-fire-for-saving-craig-kelly-20181204-p50k49.html>