

The vicious rumours at the heart of factional warfare for NSW Liberals

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The most intriguing story on Macquarie Street in recent weeks has been that of the senior government figure allegedly caught in a compromising position in one of Sydney's best known parks.

It's all very NSW politics. Salacious details have travelled like wildfire around media and political circles.



'We are not run by factions': Turnbull

In October, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull draws laughter from his colleagues after claiming the Liberal Party is not governed by backroom deals. Vision courtesy ABC News 24.

Media organisations have made enquiries that have come to nothing, strongly indicating it is wholly a fabrication.

Yet it persists – propelled by some political operatives talking to journalists – with the attendant damage to the reputation of the person targeted.

This willingness to push such a damaging story is being seen as symptomatic of a particular brand of poisonous factionalism in the NSW Liberal Party characterised by an win-at-all costs-attitude and little regard for how much internal damage is done.

It's a style of internal politics the party thought was long behind it.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is about to confront factionalism in the NSW Liberals head on. Photo: Jessica Hromas

But last weekend's byelections in the blue ribbon Liberal seats of North Shore and Manly, at which the government was belted with huge swings, for some provided more evidence it is back.

The candidates – Felicity Wilson and James Griffin – were both backed by the moderate, or left, faction.

Wilson narrowly defeated the right's Tim James in a tight preselection, while Griffin easily beat the right's choice, Walter Villatora, who was backed by former prime minister Tony Abbott.

Clearly local issues and the government's unpopular forced council mergers played into the results, but so did scandals.

There was also strong evidence that rival factional operatives took aim at the endorsed Liberal candidates – particularly Wilson, who Fairfax Media revealed had incorrectly signed a statutory declaration about how long she has lived in the area.

The declaration – in the shape of a Liberal party nomination form – was distributed to about 200 preselectors and made its way to the media.

The story almost derailed Wilson's campaign, leaving senior Liberal moderates appalled at the prospect that, suicide bomber-like, some in the right faction would be willing to blow up the endorsed Liberal candidate simply because she was not their pick.

All of this should be sounding very loud alarm bells for Premier Gladys Berejiklian who, only a few months into the job, is about to confront the issue of factionalism head on.

With the civil war in the NSW Liberals showing no signs of abating, a major convention scheduled for late July looms as a critical moment for Berejiklian's 2019 election campaign.

The meeting will see all party members invited to thrash out a potential solution to an issue that has caused a deep fissure in the NSW Liberals: whether to change how state and federal candidates are preselected.

The right faction of the Liberal party has been pushing hard for a plebiscite system giving all branch members a vote.

But the dominant left and centre right factions favour retaining the present system where preselections are decided by branch representatives and some party officials.

There is a lot of self-interest at play here – the left and centre-right run the show under the status quo – but they warn a shift to plebiscites will lead to rampant branch stacking.

Berejiklian, given her closeness to the left faction, has thus far been assumed to be an opponent of plebiscites. Then-premier Mike Baird was in favour, in close alignment with his mate Abbott.

Now Berejiklian is Premier, she says she does not have a position either way and stresses she has never publicly stated one.

It's a telling response, given what is looming as a very public fight over the issue.

The non-binding convention was the agreed-upon circuit breaker advocated by then-premier Baird and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that emerged from last year's NSW Liberal state council at which Abbott and Villatora pushed hard for the party to adopt plebiscites.

When it rolls around, there will be good reason for Berejiklian to push hard for a broadly supported solution.

The party will begin preselections for state and federal seats next year – otherwise known as peak season for factional warfare.

Avoiding a Felicity Wilson-style outbreak of friendly fire by keeping the factional suicide bombers at bay across key seats could prove pivotal to the government's chances of winning a third term in office.

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