



Turnbull ally Julia Banks caught in political crossfire

Liberal MP and Turnbull ally Julia Banks. Picture: AAP

JOHN FERGUSON 12:00AM SEPTEMBER 7, 2018

The federal Liberal MP who vowed to quit parliament in the wake of Malcolm Turnbull's ousting, citing bullying and intimidation, has herself been ensnared in the controversy over political conduct, with the leaking of a report that contains allegations she mistreated campaign workers.

Victorian backbencher Julia Banks last night strongly denied the claims, which were included in an official post-election campaign report into her successful 2016 election tilt for the seat of Chisholm. The confidential report was written by a veteran Liberal political adviser, as a formal post-campaign briefing to party headquarters, and sent to then-Victorian Liberal director Simon Frost under a formal review process to help improve campaigning at future elections.

The Liberal Party was told in the report: "The campaign went through a number of staff and volunteers. I believe it important to put on record the way staff and volunteers were treated as I have never seen anything like this before. It was almost like the candidate (Ms Banks) thought there was a platoon of volunteers sitting at home ready to jump at a moment's notice. The expectations were completely divorced from reality."

The existence of the report, which sources said had been circulated locally, emerged after Ms Banks announced she would quit parliament after the federal leadership change, claiming unspecified bullying. Ms Banks last night emphatically denied the report's allegations, saying: "Should such false allegations be published I reserve my full legal rights."

The Australian is not suggesting that the allegations made against Ms Banks are accurate, only that they have been made. Scott Morrison is due to campaign in Melbourne today amid deep concerns Ms Banks is prepared to quit early, imperilling the government. Crisis talks were under way last night about how to manage the fallout from the leaked report.

Mr Frost's replacement, Nick Demiris, said yesterday: "It is only in recent days that members of the (current administrative) committee have heard of its existence." Mr Demiris, who took over as state director a year ago, asserted that the party did not have a record of the report and claimed that it was not commissioned by the party. *The Australian* believes that the party has full knowledge of the report. Mr Demiris said: "The party also wishes to make clear that Julia Banks was never given a chance to respond to any report. Julia Banks is a respected member of the Liberal Party."

The comments were part of a report into Ms Banks's campaign, which detailed how at least two women and two men quit the campaign. Ms Banks was afforded two full-time staff from Liberal headquarters and given \$250,000. The report, which was received by party headquarters after the 2016 election, states that some of Ms Banks's meetings with the local Liberal federal electorate council and the Chisholm campaign committee in 2016 were marked by "snide and sarcastic comments and often descended into raised voices and bitter accusations".

"There is no other way than saying her treatment of most members of the FEC was appalling and would be completely unacceptable in a workplace let alone a volunteer organisation," the party report says. "FEC members were extremely frustrated with the candidate's attitude and performance." After one adviser quit, Ms Banks is accused of blaming the woman behind her back for problems with the campaign.

The report says that an elderly male volunteer, aged about 75, had arrived at the campaign office distressed after allegedly excessive, late-night demands over election posters. And when one woman quit the campaign, her male replacement lasted two or three weeks before quitting to work on the Kooyong campaign for now Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, the report said.

Despite the internal battle in the seat, Ms Banks was lauded after the campaign for having been the only Liberal candidate to win a seat from Labor in that election. Victorian Liberal president Michael Kroger would not comment on the report but said: "As far as we were concerned, Julia was an excellent candidate."

The report said Ms Banks had described herself as the campaign director in the seat, which is in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. "This led to a 'top down' approach to the entire operation of the campaign, meaning that if any of the people underneath her disagreed with something, they were seen as undermining her and the campaign and they would quickly be marginalised," the report said. "They would then be denigrated to their face and behind their backs sometimes for weeks afterwards."

The Morrison government hierarchy is deeply concerned that Ms Banks will further imperil the government by forcing an early by-election because of the constant scrutiny that has followed her controversial resignation. Chisholm is held with a margin of just 1.2 per cent and would be virtually impossible to defend at a by-election.

When Ms Banks quit politics, she claimed to have been the victim of bullying from both sides of politics. A former corporate lawyer, she is also a property owner with multiple inner city properties and a bayside holiday home. Industrial Relations Minister Kelly O'Dwyer said of Ms Banks this week: "I think that Julia Banks is no petal, she is no snowflake and she is no princess." This was in reference to claims that Ms Banks needed to be more resilient rather than complain about bullying from within and from the Labor Party.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/turnbull-ally-julia-banks-caught-in-political-crossfire/news-story/776a0d8a3237f6a90610400a38b7dabd>