

\$350,000 and threats to stop Kelly challenge

Threats and a \$350,000 job offer were reportedly made to stop a pre-selection brawl with the sitting Federal MP Craig Kelly by Kent Johns, a Sutherland Shire councillor and Liberal Party boss.

A key party fixer Scott Briggs repeatedly called on Cr Johns to drop the challenge for the federal seat of Hughes, predicting that Mr Kelly would move to the crossbench and "bring down the government" if the duel proceeded, according to The Sydney Morning Herald in a report from unnamed sources (20 Dec.):

The approaches were made about October by Mr Briggs, a party executive in Prime Minister Morrison's nearby seat of Cook, the report said.

He suggested that the \$350,000 job with the Liberal federal director would be available if Cr Johns pulled out of the preselection contest with Mr Kelly. The six-month role, Cr Johns was assured, had been approved by the Prime Minister and other key party figures.

MEDIA ATTACKS THREATENED

Mr Briggs also warned that the right-wing News Corp and 2GB radio would unleash a campaign to 'destroy' him unless he withdrew.

He allegedly conceded to Cr Johns and other local party members that Mr Kelly should be rolled, but said that the backbench MP "holds the power" in the minority government.

Mr Morrison later claimed in Parliament on December 3 that Mr Kelly had "never" threatened to go to the crossbench.

Mr Briggs made numerous attempts over several weeks to convince Cr Johns, ultimately begging him to drop out for the unity and survival of the Morrison Government.

Cr Johns rejected the offers. The Prime Minister intervened to avoid an explosive challenge, by forcing automatic endorsement for all sitting NSW MPs, which the Liberal state executive reluctantly supported.

Mr Morrison and his lieutenants put pressure to endorse Mr Kelly, including telephone calls to several Liberal executives to ensure compliance, the Herald said.

The preselection showdown -- which had been simmering for months -- boiled over in the final parliamentary sitting of the year when Mr Kelly threatened to cross the floor if he was not pre-selected, it was reported.

DESPERATE TO AVOID DEFECTION

The revelations show how party bosses were desperate to avoid Mr Kelly's defection, despite the Prime Minister saying publicly that he was "never considering" the prospect of Mr Kelly jumping ship.

No one was willing to go on the record. Mr Briggs did not respond to calls for comment. A spokesman for Mr Morrison referred questions to the Liberal Party's federal director Andrew Hirst. A federal party spokesman said cryptically:

"With both a federal and state election taking place in NSW in the first six months of next year, the party will be adding experienced campaigners to our team"

Cr Johns declined to comment officially, but referred to a previous statement that he was "disappointed" with the outcome but respected the party's decision.

He is a former Labor mayor in Rockdale who converted to the Shire Liberals. He had the key votes in the party to oust Mr Kelly as the Liberal candidate in Hughes, the Herald said.

Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull had sensationally intervened on behalf of Cr Johns, urging party officials to allow an open preselection -- in which Mr Kelly would be rolled.

Mr Turnbull said that giving in to threats like the one attributed to Mr Kelly was not "good government". As PM, he had previously saved MP Kelly from an earlier challenge.

From an original article in The Sydney Morning Herald, by [Michael Koziol](#) 20 December 2018

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/scott-morrison-s-fixer-offered-craig-kelly-s-challenger-a-350-000-party-job-to-drop-out-20181219-p50n7j.html>