

SINCLAIR DISMISSES COALITION SPLIT TALK - Sydney Morning Herald, The (Australia) - December 13, 1994 - page 2

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The former National Party leader, Mr Ian Sinclair, dismissed as "absolute nonsense" yesterday suggestions that the tension between the Coalition partners could lead to a formal split.

Distancing himself from the weekend comments of the party's leader, Mr Fischer, Mr Sinclair said there was no rationale for a break-up of the Coalition arrangement - a stance supported by other Nationals.

But the party is applying strong pressure to the Liberals to resolve their leadership problems, claiming this has been a key factor in the recent friction over social policy.

The push has a strong pro-Howard element to it.

While the party does not publicly involve itself in the leadership wrangles of its Coalition partners, there is significant pro-Howard sentiment in the National party room.

One MP contacted by the Herald yesterday said the party had virtually given up hope that Mr Downer could reclaim his authority and his standing in the polls. The Nationals would have a much better "affinity" with Mr Howard because of his long political experience and his policy background, he said.

While Mr Howard has been striving of late to soften his policy stance, he has also been cultivating support among the Nationals, stressing his ability to "work well" with them.

And despite their public disavowals of any involvement in Liberal leadership matters, any major drift of National support away from Mr Downer could complicate his efforts to rebuild his position.

It will make it even harder for him to negotiate compromises on sensitive and potentially divisive social issues, much as the former Opposition Leader, Dr Hewson, found himself handicapped by evaporating National support during the latter days of his administration.

Mr Fischer warned at the weekend that if the Liberals persisted in their support for a racial hatred bill it could cause the Coalition to founder.

"We would not want another chapter like sexual privacy," Mr Fischer said, referring to his party's distaste for the bill which passed through the Senate last week with majority Coalition support.

Six Coalition senators - three Liberal and three National - **crossed the floor** to vote against the legislation. The protest act cost the Nationals' Senate leader, Senator Ron Boswell, his front bench position.

The Nationals are angry that their attempts to have a conscience vote on the issue, thus

legitimising any vote against the bill, were rejected by the Liberal leadership to protect Mr Downer's embattled position.

However, senior Nationals yesterday described Mr Fischer's threat as a standard ploy to protect his position by ensuring the Liberals were cast as "the villains of the piece".

"There is no way the Coalition will split in what is shaping as an election year. To do so would be to invite a repeat of the 1987 disaster," one MP said, referring to the infamous Coalition split of April 1987, forced on the Federal parties by the ill-fated "Joh for PM" push by the Queensland Nationals.

Mr Sinclair, who admitted his views on the value of the Coalition had been influenced by the 1987 debacle, brushed off any suggestion of a break-up.

"There is no basis federally for breaking the Coalition," he said. "That doesn't mean the National Party can't be strong and assertive on policy points- there are areas where the National Party can set the pace on policy.

"But any suggestion that the party is better served by splitting just does not square with the facts."

PAGE 17: The fire in the Coalition's belly.

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