Tom Hughes urged defeated Malcolm Turnbull to stay in politics

www.afr.com/news/tom-hughes-urged-defeated-malcolm-turnbull-to-stay-in-politics-20160602-gpa7y1

Jun 2 2016 at 11:45 PM

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, former Attorney General and prominent barrister Tom Hughes QC and daughter Lucy Turnbull. *MICK TSIKAS*

by Andrew Clark

Malcolm Turnbull's father-in-law, the prominent Sydney QC Tom Hughes, wrote to him after he lost the Liberal leadership to Tony Abbott in 2009 urging him to remain in politics saying the Liberal Party's "present folly would pass".

Mr Hughes sent Mr Turnbull a handwritten note on December 16, 2009, or 15 days after the fateful party room meeting, saying: "There is room only for improvement and the party's present folly will pass." He advised Mr Turnbull to stay in politics and promised "the support he had given at the 2004 and 2007 elections".

In a separate letter to his brother, the distinguished art critic Robert Hughes, Tom Hughes likened Mr Abbott's ascension to the Liberal leadership to putting "the principal lunatic in charge of the asylum" and said the switch was a "potentially catastrophic decision".

These sensational revelations from the Hughes letters are contained in historian Ian Hancock's new biography *Tom Hughes QC: A Cab on the Rank*, to be published on June 6, by Federation Press.

The letters are likely to fuel tensions between Mr Turnbull and Mr Abbott who have had an uneasy relationship since Mr Turnbull took the prime ministership.

Mr Turnbull, who defeated Mr Abbott for the Liberal leadership on September 14 last year and became prime minister, lost the job to Mr Abbott more than six years earlier – on December 1, 2009.

Turnbull 'paid the price'

In the letter to Robert Hughes on December 17, 2009, Tom Hughes said: "But Malcolm, to his great credit, stood up for his principles and paid the price." He was referring to Mr Turnbull's then support of an emissions trading scheme, which was unpopular in Liberal Party branches, and a key factor in him losing the leadership to Abbott.

"To elect Abbott in his place is the equivalent of putting the bull in charge of the China shop," Mr Hughes wrote.

Further, "Abbott's behaviour in relation to the risks of global warming (from initial support for an ETS to opposition) may be compared to the oscillations of the weather vane".

Tom Hughes, who turns 93 this year, is a wartime pilot who holds the French Legion of Honour. He became a barrister 67 years ago. He is generally considered the godfather of the Australian bar and was federal Attorney General from 1969-71 in a Liberal-Country Party Government headed by John Gorton.

Mr Hughes is the grandson of a former Lord Mayor of Sydney, Sir Thomas Hughes and father of Lucy, who has been Malcolm Turnbull's wife for 36 years. Lucy Turnbull is also a onetime Lord Mayor of Sydney and a lawyer, investor, author and philanthropist.

Mr Turnbull, who won the blue ribbon Sydney seat of Wentworth in 2004 and entered the John Howard-led cabinet in 2007, was the Opposition's treasury spokesman after Howard lost an election later that year and succeeded Brendan Nelson as opposition leader a year later.

However, he faltered as opposition leader and just 10 months later Tony Abbott defeated him for the Liberal Party leadership by just one vote at a special party room meeting.

Mr Hancock, who is a former reader in history at the Australian National University, has written biographies of John Gorton, former NSW Liberal premier Nick Greiner, and books on the federal and NSW Liberal Party.

An extract from the book is included in the Review section of today's edition of *The Australian Financial Review.*