PM's dad-in-law apologised to Abbott

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Tom Hughes, Malcolm Turnbull's father-in-law, said making Tony Abbott Liberal leader in 2009 was akin to putting the "lunatic in charge of the asylum".

Malcolm Turnbull has revealed his father-in-law has apologised to Tony Abbott for calling the former prime minister a "lunatic".

Tom Hughes, a former federal attorney-general, made the comment in a 2009 letter to his brother Robert, the prominent art critic and historian.

The correspondence followed the Liberal Party's decision to replace Mr Turnbull as leader with Mr Abbott.

The decision was akin to putting "the principal lunatic in charge of the asylum", Mr Hughes said, predicting it would be a "potentially catastrophic decision".

In a separate note to Mr Turnbull, who married Mr Hughes' businesswoman daughter Lucy 36 years ago, he said there was "room only for improvement and the party's present folly will pass".

The revelations are contained in a new biography by historian Ian Hancock, called Tom Hughes QC: A Cab on the Rank.

Mr Turnbull, campaigning in Adelaide on Friday, was quizzed about the comments.

"He is a great man, 93 years of age this year," the prime minister told reporters of his father-in-law, noting his war and parliamentary service.

The memoir would be of great interest and inspiration to many people who read his life story.

"Tom has great respect for Tony Abbott and the note ... is some years old and I know that Tom has written a note to Tony to apologise if any offence is caused by that."