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Tom Hughes sounded warning on switch from son-in-law Malcolm Turnbull to 'lunatic' Tony Abbott in 2009

Fergus Hunter
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Malcolm Turnbull's father-in-law, former attorney-general Tom Hughes, called Tony Abbott a "lunatic" and urged Mr Turnbull to stay in politics after losing the Liberal leadership in 2009, predicting the party's "folly" would pass.

In a letter to his brother, prominent art critic Robert Hughes, the giant of the Australian legal fraternity said making Mr Abbott leader was akin to putting "the principal lunatic in charge of the asylum" and predicted 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 is room only for improvement and the party's present folly will pass".

The Prime Minister said on Friday afternoon that Mr Hughes had apologised to Mr Abbott for the revelations contained in a new biography of him by historian Ian Hancock, called *Tom Hughes QC: A Cab on the Rank*, to be published this week.

The scathing commentary and predictions of his son-in-law's return to power from December 2009 would ultimately be vindicated, although the wait was long. Six years after he wrote the letters, Mr Turnbull was back in the leadership after the Abbott government was characterised by chaos and dysfunction.

In the letter to his brother, Mr Hughes said that Mr Turnbull "paid the price" for his erstwhile support for an emissions trading scheme in the face of his party's opposition. He said it was "to his great credit" that he stood up for his principles.

"To elect Abbott in his place is the equivalent of putting the bull in charge of the china shop or the principal lunatic in charge of the asylum," Mr Hughes wrote.

"Abbott's behaviour in relation to the risks of global warming may be compared to the oscillations of the weather vane."

Since rising to the leadership, the now Prime Minister has publicly embraced Mr Abbott's Direct Action climate policy, which he once criticised as an "environmental figleaf to cover determination to do nothing" and a "recipe for fiscal recklessness".

Mr Turnbull said the book about his 93-year-old father-in-law would be interesting and inspiring for people interested in his life story.

"Tom has great respect for Tony Abbott and the note that is referred to in his memoirs, of course, is some years old and I know that Tom has written a note to Tony to apologise if any offence is caused by that," he said.

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