

Fielding seeks ETS conscience vote

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FAMILY First senator Steve Fielding has called on Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull to give Coalition MPs a conscience vote on emissions trading scheme legislation.

Senator Fielding wrote to Mr Turnbull after a newspaper survey revealed most Liberal backbenchers opposed their leader's position of negotiating amendments with the Government.

Senator Fielding said the Coalition "should not capitulate to the Government's demands simply because it is afraid of giving . . . a double dissolution trigger". A decision to introduce a scheme to Australia before the rest of the world would be "economic suicide", he said.

His intervention came as confusion emerged in Coalition ranks over whether the joint party room had — when in government — approved legislation for the first step towards implementing such a scheme. An emissions scheme was a Howard government election policy.

Opposition emissions spokesman Ian Macfarlane was forced to delve into 2007 records to establish if the Coalition parties had approved such legislation.

Mr Macfarlane will today give the shadow cabinet an overview of Opposition work on the Government's legislation, next week he will give it a framework of proposed amendments.

In the latest bizarre twist to the Opposition agonising, the Nationals' Ron Boswell said he did not recall the Coalition scheme going through the joint party room.

"I'm not saying it didn't," he said. "I've asked many shadow cabinet ministers at the time and they don't remember it terribly well either. I think it is one of those things which has slipped through."

Liberal senator Cory Bernardi said the Opposition took a scheme to the election but "was that ever approved through our party room? I have no recollection of it."

Senator Bernardi said he understood there was an agreement between John Howard and Mr Turnbull, then environment minister. "It was announced unilaterally just prior to the election and, of course, we did what we thought was in the best interests of the party."

Liberal frontbencher Helen Coonan said her recollection was that it did go to the joint party room.