Malcolm Turnbull’s father-in-law, former attorney-general Tom Hughes QC, labelled Tony Abbott a “lunatic” and called the decision to make him leader of the Liberal Party a “folly”.

According to a new biography, Mr Hughes, Lucy Turnbull’s father, sent a handwritten note to Mr Turnbull after he lost the Liberal leadership to Mr Abbott in 2009. “There is room only for improvement and the party’s present folly will pass,” he said.

The book also republishes a blistering letter Mr Hughes sent to his brother, the late Robert Hughes, world-renowned as an art critic and accomplished historian, when Mr Abbott became Liberal leader.

"This is a potentially catastrophic decision," he wrote. “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. Abbott’s behaviour in relation to the risks of global warming may be compared to the oscillations of the weather vane.”

Just weeks out from election day, the book is a reminder of divisions within the Liberal Party still bubbling beneath the surface over Mr Turnbull’s leadership challenge to Mr Abbott in last year.

*The Australian* understands Mr Turnbull was expected to launch *Tom Hughes QC: A Cab on the Rank*, written by Liberal Party historian Ian Hancock. Former High Court chief justice Murray Gleesom will instead launch the book later this month.

Although he did not support Mr Abbott in his preselection for the seat of Warringah in 1994, Mr Hughes did rejoice at John Howard’s election victory in 1996. Mr Howard was Mr Hughes’s campaign manager in the 1963 election campaign.

“What a stunning victory!” Mr Hughes wrote to Mr Howard. “You have made it to the top by dedicated hard work in the face of setbacks that would have deterred anyone else.”

Mr Hughes, 92, was Liberal MP for the NSW seats of Parkes and Berowra from
1963 to 1972, and attorney-general from 1969 to 1971. He enlisted in the RAAF during World War II, dabbled in horse racing and farming, and for six decades was an icon of the Sydney and Australian Bars.

He began his political career as an anti-communist, staunch conservative, free marketeer and traditionalist, but over time drifted towards the centre and became an exponent of more liberal views, embracing republicanism. He “admired and loved” John Gorton, who effectively voted himself out of the prime ministership after a confidence motion in 1971. Billy McMahon, his successor, sacked Mr Hughes from cabinet.

Mr Hughes held Malcolm Fraser responsible and trashed him at Gorton’s memorial service in 2002. “History’s judgment will be kinder (to Gorton) than it will be upon those who conspired to bring him down,” Mr Hughes said. He makes it clear in the book that he could never have served in a Fraser-led government.

The biography details Mr Hughes’s lucrative, high-profile career as a barrister and wrestles with complex legal issues, including chief justice Garfield Barwick advising governor-general John Kerr before the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975.

Mr Hughes, who admired Barwick greatly, believes he “erred in principle” by advising Kerr on the use of his vice-regal powers. If Kerr’s dismissal were subject to a legal challenge, Mr Hughes believes Barwick “would have been obliged to disqualify himself from any adjudication” in the matter.

The book uses personal diaries and notebooks, private correspondence and family records, and is augmented by interviews with family members, friends, politicians and legal colleagues.

*Tom Hughes: A Cab on the Rank* by Ian Hancock, published by The Federation Press on Monday.