

Squalid manoeuvre gives extra vote to minority Australian Labor government

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The minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday gained a vital extra vote in parliament by installing a member of the opposition as the House of Representatives speaker.

The manoeuvre bolsters the government's tenuous position in parliament—although immediate concerns have been raised in the media and within the government itself over the public reaction to yet another squalid backroom Labor Party operation. The *Australian Financial Review's* frontpage report today is headlined, "Dirty deal shores up Gillard." The front page of the *Daily Telegraph*, Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, was emblazoned with "The Slipper Coup: King Rat."

Events unfolded quickly yesterday. Labor MP Harry Jenkins officially resigned as speaker at the start of the day, making way for Liberal Party "rat" Peter Slipper. As a result, the parliament has an opposition parliamentarian functioning as speaker for the first time in its history—though Slipper has now quit the Liberal Party, ahead of an anticipated expulsion.

The Queensland parliamentarian had already drawn the ire of his colleagues by accepting the deputy speaker role after last year's election. Slipper was widely expected to be ousted from his electorate by his own party at the next election—and so he has apparently decided to make the most of his remaining time in parliament. As speaker, he receives an immediate salary increase—going from \$168,000 a year to \$245,000—along with other perks.

The change in speaker significantly alters the arithmetic within the 150-member House of Representatives. The opposition Liberal-National coalition loses a vote, going from 72 to 71. Under parliamentary rules, the speaker may not cast a ballot on legislation except for a casting vote in the event of a tie. With Jenkins' resignation, the Labor Party therefore gains a vote on the parliamentary floor. The

Gillard government still has the backing of the sole Greens lower house member, Adam Bandt, and three Independents, Andrew Wilkie, Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott.

The net result is that the Labor government has increased its effective majority from one to two seats.

Ever since Gillard did her deal with the Greens and independents to remain in office after the last election, she has faced the danger that her government could collapse if one of its members resigned, or died. Among the many possibilities confronting Labor was that backbencher Craig Thompson could be forced to quit over a scandal involving his alleged use of trade union credit cards for paying prostitutes. Independent MP Andrew Wilkie had threatened to bring the government down unless it passed legislation next year restricting poker machine gambling—but he now appears powerless to enforce this threat.

What some sections of the media are trumpeting as a triumph for Gillard could quickly backfire.

Senior government MPs are now on the record as endorsing the credentials of their new speaker. Peter Slipper, nicknamed "Slippery Pete," is generally referred to by journalists as a "colourful" character. The *Australian's* Peter van Onselen wrote today: "Slipper's career has been punctuated by scandal, allegations of parliamentary allowance misuses and simple stupidity. From high-spending travel entitlements to party defections between the Nationals and the Liberals to finding himself locked in a disabled toilet calling for assistance because he thought the sliding door only had push and pull functionality, Slipper is hardly a model MP."

The *Australian* quoted one unnamed Labor adviser on the Slipper appointment: "It is a mistake, a very stupid idea. It will fail."

A stench surrounds yesterday's events. No-one believes Gillard's suggestion that the government only learned about Jenkins' decision to resign at 7.30 a.m. yesterday morning and that Slipper was then approached with the job offer an hour later. The operation was clearly organised in advance by Labor's factional powerbrokers, and has revived memories of the anti-democratic coup orchestrated against Kevin Rudd, behind the backs of the Australian people, in June 2010.

Gillard has been unable to counter the enormous hostility of ordinary people toward the ousting of Rudd and her own role in it. The latest parliamentary manoeuvres will likely only compound the prime minister's low personal standing.

The *Australian* today warned the government in an editorial: "By increasing her numerical comfort in the divisions of the chamber, Ms Gillard might have sullied Labor with voters ... we saw in the reaction to Kevin Rudd's overthrow that the public expect a less cynical exercise of power in their name." The *Age's* political editor Michelle Grattan said the deal had a "tawdry feel about it." She continued: "Last night Labor was looking smug but grubby. Gillard has added a dubious deal to an unfortunate record of stabbing her former leader in the back, and breaking a key election promise."

Notwithstanding such concerns, every section of the media is insisting that Gillard utilise her enhanced numbers in parliament to implement pro-business economic "reform" measures. The corporate elite has long demanded that the Labor government defy massive public opposition, by imposing brutal austerity spending cuts and further draconian industrial relations laws to accelerate the assault on workers' jobs, wages and conditions. It sees Slipper's elevation as parliamentary speaker as a key opportunity, and test, for the Labor Party.

The *Australian's* editorial, "Time for PM to stop doing deals and focus on reform", declared: "These unseemly events can only prove beneficial for the government, and the nation, if Ms Gillard embraces the opportunity to start governing as if she has an unassailable majority... Industrial relations, taxation and welfare all need serious attention in order to improve the nation's productivity. Ms Gillard has run out of excuses for failing to tackle these challenges."

The *Australian Financial Review* similarly insisted that Gillard's "stronger grip on power should stiffen its resolve on matters such as the upcoming mid-year budget review to make quality spending cuts to start reducing the structural

deficit."

The economic turmoil in Europe is fuelling these demands for "quality spending cuts" in Australia. Senior banking executives are openly warning of a domestic financial crisis caused by the eurozone "contagion."

Opposition leader Tony Abbott is now under enormous pressure. Since the formation of the minority Labor government last year, Abbott's strategy has centred on forcing an early election by opposing virtually every piece of legislation put before parliament. Yet he has failed to win the backing of key sections of the ruling elite. This is because of his refusal to outline an alternative right-wing program of spending cuts, industrial relations "reform" and other measures. At the same time, Abbott has insisted that if he wins office he will rescind many of the Gillard government's initiatives that have enjoyed the support of key sections of big business and finance capital—including the carbon tax and the recently legislated mining tax.

"With power slightly further from his grasp," the *Australian Financial Review* sharply cautioned, "opposition leader Tony Abbott is now under pressure. Rather than opposing and wedging the government initiatives, or playing dead on issues such as industrial relations, he must develop a suite of credible policy alternatives."

The verdict in the big business media is a further indication of a shift that has been underway for some months. While the corporate elite remains critical of the Gillard government's failure to move fast enough on its restructuring agenda, it is Abbott who is on notice to shape up or make way for a new opposition leader.



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