Australian prime minister defeats challenge from Kevin Rudd

Patrick O'Connor
27 February 2012

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard defeated Kevin Rudd, her predecessor and former foreign minister, in a Labor Party leadership ballot held earlier today. Gillard was backed by 71 of her parliamentary colleagues, against 31 who voted for Rudd. Far from overcoming the crisis wracking the government, the leadership ballot has resolved none of the key policy issues underlying the vitriolic infighting within the Labor Party.

Gillard has been assailed in recent days by Rudd and his supporters. Former Attorney General Robert McClelland declared it was impossible for her to win the next election, while the government's leader of the House of Representatives, Anthony Albanese, insisted that the key issue remained the coup against Rudd in June 2010, which was "not fair" and "wrong." For a sitting prime minister to be openly opposed by one-third of her caucus in this manner would normally signal a terminal crisis. Gillard, however, claimed she enjoyed "overwhelming" support within the government and insisted that "the leadership question is now determined ... this political drama is over."

Gillard declared that "we will move forward as a united team." No one in her party, however, or in the political and media establishment as a whole, believes that the bitter divisions opened up by the rancorous public debate over the Labor leadership—unprecedented in post-war Australian politics—will be patched up.

After losing the vote, Rudd declared he accepted the "verdict without qualification and without rancour." There is little doubt, however, that his campaign to return to the prime minister's office will continue. Rudd pointedly declared he would not "initiate" another leadership challenge, but did not rule out the prospect of being nominated by other MPs opposed to Gillard.

There is a long parliamentary tradition of would-be leaders retiring to the backbench, where they either actively work to undermine their rival or wait for changed circumstances to produce more favourable numbers. Rudd requires just over 20 parliamentarians to switch camps to gain a majority. Many who voted for Gillard were undoubtedly dragooned into doing so by what was aptly described as the prime minister's "shock and awe" campaign against Rudd. Gillard's backers denounced Rudd in extraordinary terms, while several of her senior ministers publicly announced they would not serve in cabinet if he became prime minister again. Treasurer Wayne Swan declared that Rudd was erratic and dysfunctional, accused him of sabotaging the government's 2010 election campaign and insisted he "does not hold any Labor values."

The media coverage of the various minutiae of parliamentary numbers, factional divisions, and personalities involved has served as a smokescreen to cover over the real political issues involved.

Last Wednesday Rudd resigned as foreign minister while engaged in official business in Washington, yet the Australian press has maintained the absurd pretence that his resignation and campaign against Gillard have had nothing to do with foreign policy. In fact, Rudd and Gillard have markedly different positions on the key geostrategic question confronting the Australian ruling elite—how to respond to escalating tensions between the US, Australia's key military and diplomatic ally, and China, now Australia's most important trade partner.

This dilemma triggered the 2010 coup against Rudd, and is responsible for the continued political crisis of the Labor government. Gillard was installed as prime minister in order to more closely align Australian foreign policy and military infrastructure with the Obama administration's provocative attempt to counter Beijing's growing geostrategic influence in East Asia and the Pacific. As prime minister, Rudd had sought to mediate between American and Chinese interests in the region, preventing an open conflict between the two

© World Socialist Web Site

nuclear armed powers. His stance, while never aimed at undermining either Washington's geostrategic standing in the Asia-Pacific or the US-Australia alliance, cut across President Barack Obama's efforts to aggressively contain China.

An internal memo written in 2009 for staffers within Stratfor, an intelligence think tank with close ties to the US security apparatus, highlighted the discussion on Rudd's outlook within American ruling circles. "Rudd is seen as a leader that attempts to lead Australia in a more internationally focused way that does not depend on following the United States' lead on every issue," the document, published by WikiLeaks earlier today, explained. "Rudd is an outspoken supporter of China and has sought to maintain good relations with Beijing. This is a result of the developing geopolitical dynamic in which China's growth is increasingly beneficial to Australia's economy, but must be balanced along with Australia's position in the US economic, political and security sphere."

Leaked diplomatic cables, previously published by WikiLeaks, detailed US "assets" within the trade union bureaucracy and Labor Party factions who spearheaded the coup that installed Gillard as prime minister. These forces have remained loyal to Gillard—though they have kept a low profile in recent days, mindful of the public hostility towards their role in ousting Rudd—and are the key reason why she remains prime minister. Gillard unconditionally aligned Australia with Washington's growing confrontation with China, including plans announced last November to station thousands of US Marines in the Northern Territory.

Since the coup, geostrategic tensions in the Asia-Pacific have further sharpened. The Obama administration has provocatively inflamed border disputes in the South China Sea—egging on the claims made against China by Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries. It has also moved to bolster its military presence in the region, at the same time promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an economic bloc designed to boost US exports and undermine China.

The Obama administration's stance reflects the desperate drive by US imperialism to use military force to gain an advantage over its rivals and offset its economic decline. There are, however, elements within the Washington foreign policy establishment, represented by figures including Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, who are concerned about the implications of a war with China and are urging that some kind of concert of powers be established in East Asia to accommodate Beijing. These layers may have encouraged Rudd's campaign against Gillard. It is still unclear exactly what happened in Washington last week, in the lead-up to Rudd's late night resignation as foreign minister. He had earlier met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta, ahead of a planned speech on the theme of "Pax Pacifica" at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which was never delivered.

On domestic economic policy, both Rudd and Gillard appealed to big business and finance capital. Rudd suggested he would revise the carbon tax, reducing its impact on corporations. Gillard stressed her commitment to restoring a budget surplus this year. The *Australian Financial Review* today reported that figures close to the prime minister said that a surplus based on "credible" spending cuts was the "centrepiece of a political strategy aimed at rebuilding Labor's credibility." The government is determined, in other words, to prove its value to the ruling elite by spearheading an austerity agenda, slashing jobs, wages, and working conditions to bolster Australian capitalism's international competitiveness amid a worsening global economic crisis.

Doubts remain, however, about Gillard's capacity to deliver. The *Australian Financial Review* issued a scathing editorial today, "A government is torn apart", which declared that people had not voted "for the chaotic and hate-filled mess that we have witnessed this week." It concluded: "The minority Labor government has destroyed its credibility and authority to govern. The public is rightly sick of it and deserves the opportunity to clean up the mess in a general election."

Most Murdoch newspapers, including the flagship national daily, the *Australian*, have notably refrained from urging an early election. There is little confidence in opposition leader Tony Abbott, and the Liberal-National parties are riven by their own deep divisions, both on foreign affairs and economic policy.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site