

Australian parliamentary speaker steps down amid sex, corruption allegations

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The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has been plunged further into crisis with the eruption of a scandal around Peter Slipper, speaker of the House of Representatives.

Slipper is under criminal investigation for alleged misuse of travel expense entitlements and is also being sued by a former male staffer for sexual harassment. Salacious details of the alleged harassment, contained in Federal Court documents filed last Friday, have been widely promoted in the media, as have alleged sexual relationships between Slipper and other men. Slipper denied all the charges, but said he would step down as speaker until the criminal investigation over travel expenses was resolved.

This alters the minority government's standing in the parliament. The Labor Party loses a vote, because its MP Anna Burke, previously deputy speaker, is now the speaker. Under parliamentary rules, the speaker only casts a vote in the event of a tied vote. The minority government effectively commands 74 votes in the House of Representatives—71 Labor members plus the Greens' Adam Bandt and independents Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor—against 73 for the Liberal-National opposition. If unaligned independent MP Andrew Wilkie votes with the opposition on any legislation or a motion of no confidence, Labor's speaker would be forced to cast a ballot to break the deadlock.

The government is on a parliamentary knife edge. It could immediately collapse if it loses a single MP, through a forced resignation or any other mechanism.

The Gillard government promoted Slipper as speaker last November in a desperate bid to shore up its position. Slipper had been elected to parliament as a Liberal Party

representative, but the opposition was reportedly planning to remove him at the next election, prompting Slipper to “rat” on his colleagues and accept the lucrative speaker post. Sections of the media expressed concern at the time about this move, concerned that Slipper, nicknamed “Slippery Pete” and generally referred to as a “colourful character,” would further tarnish the image of parliament, an institution already widely despised among ordinary people.

The Labor government trumpeted the move, which effectively gave it an extra one-seat buffer, as a tactical masterstroke—yet just five months later the manoeuvre has blown up in its face. *Australian Financial Review* commentator Geoff Kitney yesterday summed up one aspect of the media's reaction to the episode: “Julia Gillard's grip on power has slipped. It is now weaker than at any time since she seized power from Kevin Rudd in June 2010.”

Whatever Gillard's immediate fate, the Slipper episode underscores the depth of the crisis wracking not just the Labor government but the entire parliamentary system in Australia. The anti-democratic character of Gillard's installation has forever tainted Gillard and her government. The backroom coup of June 2010 was followed by a farcical election campaign in August 2010, in which there was no discussion of the real political issues confronting the population. Disgust with all the major parties resulted in the first hung parliament in 70 years. Then, after backroom negotiations and sordid deal making, a minority Labor government was formed, dependent on the Greens and independents.

The continued turmoil reflects the unprecedented gulf that separates the major parties from working people. Lacking any social base of support, the minority

government is orchestrating a far-reaching reorientation of both foreign policy—joining the Obama administration in its reckless moves to militarily confront China in East Asia and the Pacific—and domestic policy, imposing savage austerity budget cuts against the working class as part of a wider restructuring of the economy.

The Slipper scandal has raised concerns in business and media circles about the Labor government's ability to deliver its promised surplus in the budget, due on May 8. The parliament is scheduled to sit again on the same day that Treasurer Wayne Swan is to announce the details of cuts of more than \$40 billion. This is equivalent to more than 2.5 percent of gross domestic product, the sharpest reduction in spending in Australia in six decades.

The *Australian Financial Review* yesterday stated that the government's ability to "deliver one of the most critical budgets in years has suffered a serious blow" with the Slipper affair. The newspaper's editorial described Gillard as heading a "lame duck administration" and called for an early election to deliver a majority government.

This demand for an end to the Labor government has not, however, been taken up by the Murdoch press or other sections of the media. The *Australian's* editorial writers have castigated Gillard over the Slipper episode, urging her to focus on pushing through the necessary pro-business economic "reform" measures instead of being preoccupied with shoring up her numbers in parliament.

This response reflects the corporate elite's lack of confidence in opposition leader Tony Abbott to deliver anything like what the Labor government is preparing in the budget. Abbott has maintained his pseudo-populist campaigning against Gillard. Yesterday he insisted that he had no plans to cut welfare benefits if he became prime minister. Abbott effectively repudiated recent statements by his shadow treasurer Joe Hockey that the "age of entitlement" was over and that Australia had to emulate Hong Kong's tax and welfare policies.

Treasurer Swan and other senior Labor ministers have publicly appealed to Abbott not to try to exploit the government's weakness in parliament and undermine the budget cuts. The government hopes to establish a de facto "grand coalition" for austerity, uniting the major parties on the drive to slash spending on welfare, health,

education and social infrastructure.

There are many unanswered questions about the allegations levelled against Slipper. Abbott has been forced to answer queries about the opposition's ties to the Slipper staffer making the sexual harassment allegations, James Ashby, a member of the Liberal National Party in Queensland. Asked on the ABC's "7.30" program if anyone in the opposition had assisted Ashby prepare his legal case, Abbott replied: "Not that I'm aware of."

The harassment charges were first reported by the *Daily Telegraph's* Steve Lewis on Saturday. Lewis has admitted that he had been in contact with Ashby "for some time" and that he knew of the Federal Court documents before they were filed, but has refused to provide further details.

Gillard and other government ministers have indicated that they would be willing to see Slipper return as speaker even before the sexual harassment accusations against him were heard in court. This is another measure of their desperation ahead of the May budget. Today, however, one of the independent MPs backing the minority government, Rob Oakeshott, declared he would veto any such move. Oakeshott told the *Australian Financial Review* that he was "seething" over assurances the government gave him about "rumours" concerning Slipper.

The day to day instability of the Gillard government is only compounding uncertainty about the budget and the deep frustration within ruling circles over Labor's apparent inability to step up the pace of pro-business economic restructuring.



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