

Australia: Speaker's resignation deepens Gillard government crisis

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The Labor government has come one step closer to disintegrating following the resignation last night of the speaker of the parliament, Peter Slipper. In unprecedented scenes, and amid a vitriolic personal slanging match between Liberal opposition leader Tony Abbott and Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Abbott moved a motion to force the removal of the speaker for the first time in the parliament's 112-year history. Despite the motion's narrow defeat, Slipper announced his resignation five hours later after two key independents, whose votes are crucial to the survival of the minority Labor government, told him that his position had become untenable.

The parliamentary drama followed the release two days earlier of private text messages sent by Slipper containing various unflattering descriptions of women's genitalia. The text messages were made public as part of court proceedings initiated by a former Slipper staff member, James Ashby, who has claimed that Slipper sexually harassed him.

The case against the former speaker, now before the Federal Court, has all the hallmarks of a dirty tricks campaign orchestrated by his political enemies in the opposition Liberal party, with the aim of destroying both him and the minority Labor government. Ashby has consulted closely throughout the sordid affair with former Liberal MP and Howard government minister Mal Brough, who is challenging Slipper for his parliamentary seat at the next federal election. Also involved has been a prominent journalist from News Limited, the media group owned by Rupert Murdoch.

Slipper's appointment to the speakership last November by Prime Minister Gillard caused an uproar when she offered him the job, which had been held by a Labor appointee, in a bid to increase her wafer-slim majority on the floor of the House of Representatives. At the time, Slipper was a long-standing, but disgruntled, member of the Liberal Party.

Ever since he accepted the post, the opposition's harassment of Slipper has continued to escalate. In April, he eventually agreed to stand down from the speakership, with the independents' support, until the Ashby court case was finalised. The court's release of the text messages became the catalyst for Slipper's demise.

That such private opinions, on matters which have no bearing whatsoever on the parliamentary agenda, have been able to be used to effect the speaker's resignation is a product of an increasingly frenzied campaign waged by Gillard and the rest of the Labor frontbench to pursue gender politics against opposition leader Abbott.

Desperate to bolster public support for her government, which is reviled by wide sections of the working class, and headed for an electoral wipe-out at the next poll, Gillard has resorted to accusing Abbott of being a "misogynist."

The publication of Slipper's text messages enabled Abbott and the opposition to hoist Gillard on her own petard. In moving his no confidence motion in the speaker, Abbott declared that the government could not accuse him of misogyny and then "defend the indefensible."

Having stood down, Slipper has gone to the crossbenches where he is expected to vote with the government on key issues of confidence. But further allegations, possibly involving other MPs, may be about to surface.

Three weeks ago, the *Australian*, the flagship of the Murdoch empire, warned in an extraordinary editorial that Gillard's personal past, including an affair with a married man, had so far been quarantined from public scrutiny, but that "another such relationship" had "crossed over into her own frontbench ranks." The government "could hardly complain" if the opposition chose to explore these issues.

It repeated those warnings in an editorial today,

declaring that Gillard had chosen to elevate the so-called gender war and that “Labor’s personal smear campaign could backfire.”

The context of the events of the past few days is the ongoing collapse of the so-called mining boom, which has been crucial in sustaining government revenues, and the increasingly public demands of key sections of the financial and corporate establishment for a rapid shift in policy.

Last month, the Reserve Bank decided to lower interest rates again, while its governor, Glenn Stevens, pointed to the worsening situation of the global and Australian economy, sparking a series of comments insisting upon the adoption of a new political agenda.

Long-time Labor adviser Professor Ross Garnaut warned that the “salad days” of the Australian economy had gone and that the crisis facing government funding was potentially as serious as in 1931, when the infamous Premiers Plan was adopted and government spending slashed. Pointing to the attacks now being prepared against the social position of the working class, he insisted on the need for “sacrifice.”

Garnaut was followed by the former Commonwealth Bank and Future Fund chief David Murray, who told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s news program 7.30 that Australia could go the way of Greece if the inflow of funds from international financial markets, on which the Australian banking system depends, ceased. The comments of Garnaut and Murray were followed by a major speech by Treasury Secretary Martin Parkinson last Friday, in which he insisted that present levels of government spending on welfare and social services were unsustainable.

The ongoing political crisis, and the distorted form it takes, are rooted in the inability of the present parliamentary setup to discuss, let alone implement, this vicious austerity agenda against the working class without unleashing mass opposition and huge social struggles.

Moreover, there are deep divisions within both major parliamentary parties.

Gillard remains under threat of another challenge by ousted former prime minister Kevin Rudd, despite having defeated him in a leadership ballot last February.

In recent days, Rudd has been operating as a kind of alternate prime minister, delivering major speeches on US-China relations and calling for a Pax Pacifica, in which neither China nor the US would be dominant, in order to prevent a war between the two major powers. This issue played a central role in Rudd’s removal in the coup of

June 23-24 2010 because his orientation came into conflict with the Obama administration’s determination to assert US hegemony in the region under its so-called “pivot to Asia.”

The ongoing survival of Gillard’s government is a day-to-day proposition, since it now depends on the support of at least five of the seven independents on the crossbenches. The only sure guarantee it has is that the Greens, who have one member in the House of Representatives and who hold the balance of power in the Senate, will continue to support it, no matter how right-wing its policies.

In the opposition ranks, Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted by Abbott as Liberal leader in late 2009 over his support for the Rudd government’s carbon emissions policy, remains in the wings, with support inside the financial and business establishment, waiting for a return to the leadership. Significantly, Turnbull also has disagreements with Gillard’s policy of unconditional support for Washington’s anti-China push, reflecting the position of sections of business and finance dependent on good relations with China.

There are also divisions within the conservative Liberal and National Parties over the issue of Chinese investment in Australia, as well as plans to deregulate the marketing of wheat.

Furthermore, there are considerable doubts in ruling circles over Abbott’s populism, and his refusal to spell out the details of the \$50 billion in spending cuts he has pledged to carry out.

The political crisis has assumed a somewhat bizarre form because none of the parties can openly canvass the real issues at stake. This stalemate will not, however, continue indefinitely. Key sections of the financial and corporate elite are demanding a new government that will carry out their agenda, just as is now underway in Europe, the UK and the US.

The working class must develop its own independent response, through the active political struggle for a workers’ government, based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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