

New Australian PM signifies further right-wing shift

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Today's swearing-in of Tony Abbott as prime minister of a Liberal-National Coalition government marks another rightward turn in official Australian politics and underscores the yawning gulf that separates the entire political establishment from the broad mass of working people.

Only six years ago, following the landslide defeat of the previous Howard government in 2007, Abbott was seen as so overtly right wing, and tainted by his key roles in Howard's government, that he was regarded by his Liberal Party peers, and himself, as "unelectable." Pulling out of the initial post-election contest for Liberal Party leadership, Abbott noted that he was "obviously very closely identified with the outgoing prime minister."

Now, after six years of its relentless implementation of the agenda dictated by both Washington and the Australian corporate elite, the Labor Party is so reviled among working people that it has paved the way for an Abbott-led Liberal government. The new government will press ahead with the ongoing assault on the social position of the working class, and with Australian involvement in US-led wars.

Abbott commenced his political career, in the 1970s, on the far-right of the official political spectrum, and entered the mainstream of the Liberal and Labor parties as they shifted ever further to the right to embrace the economic restructuring required by global capital.

Abbott began as a Sydney University protégé of Bob Santamaria, the longtime leader of the National Civic Council (NCC), a virulent anti-communist Catholic movement in the trade unions and Labor Party that was formed in the 1950s. The NCC was a strident defender of the "Cold War" launched by US imperialism against the Soviet Union, and a fervent supporter of Australia's participation in the Vietnam War. NCC "industrial groupers" took control of some unions and orchestrated a split in the Labor Party in 1955, resulting in the formation of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The DLP, which gained seats in the Senate, supported the Liberal-Country Party coalition governments of the 1950s and 1960s.

After initially entering a Jesuit seminary for three years, Abbott was employed during the 1980s as a journalist for the *Bulletin* magazine and then for Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper. Both publications had close ties to the US and Australian security apparatuses. In those circles, he developed friendships with senior Labor figures, notably future Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who urged him to join the Labor Party. Abbott is known to have voted

for Labor in the 1988 New South Wales state election and, with the backing of Carr and others, could have become a Labor MP.

After seeking Santamaria's advice, however, Abbott turned toward the Liberal Party and rose rapidly in its ranks. By 1990, he was press secretary to Liberal leader John Hewson and worked closely in launching Hewson's notorious program, titled *Fightback!* as the basis for the 1993 election. This 650-page manifesto sought to accelerate the "free market" restructuring that had been implemented by the Hawke and Keating governments from 1983, as well as by Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the US.

Fightback! featured abolition of award wages and conditions for workers, elimination of unemployment benefits after nine months, the scrapping of Medicare bulk-billing, severe welfare cuts, introduction of a 15 percent Goods and Services Tax and sweeping income tax cuts for middle- and high-income earners.

By spelling out so specifically the agenda required by the corporate elite, Hewson lost what had been regarded, because of intense hostility towards the Keating Labor government, as an unloseable election for the Liberals. Drawing the lessons of this experience, Abbott parted company with Hewson on the eve of the 1993 election and increasingly moved into the orbit of John Howard, who was to regain the Liberal leadership in 1995. Abbott was installed in a safe Liberal seat on Sydney's north shore in 1994, supported by a glowing reference from Howard.

Howard led the Coalition to victory in 1996, exploiting working class disaffection with Labor's pro-corporate restructuring of the economy. By contrast to Hewson, Howard adopted a "small target" tactic of not spelling out his plans, while making a pitch to the so-called "battlers" who had suffered under Labor.

Under Howard's wing, Abbott enjoyed a rapid ascension. He immediately became a parliamentary secretary for employment and youth affairs (1996–98), then employment services minister (1998–2001). In those posts, he oversaw the imposition of some of Howard's real agenda, notably forced "work for the dole," the privatisation of federal employment services and the establishment of the Australian Building and Construction Commission. The ABCC, with draconian powers to interrogate and prosecute building workers, became the first instalment in what was later titled WorkChoices—forcing workers onto individual contracts in order to further decimate wages and conditions.

By 2001, Abbott was elevated into cabinet. He became workplace relations minister, manager of government business in the House of Representatives and one of the most vocal defenders

of Howard's policies. He unwaveringly advocated participation in the criminal US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and backed the invocation of the "war on terrorism" to introduce police-state measures, such as detention without trial. Abbott was also in the forefront of fomenting anti-refugee xenophobia to divert mounting social discontent. He stridently defended the government's "Pacific Solution" of consigning asylum seekers to be detained on remote Pacific islands.

From 2003 to 2007, Abbott was handed the key health portfolio, where his predecessor, Kay Patterson, had provoked outrage among doctors by too openly winding back the Medicare health insurance system. While publicly eschewing any intent to slash public health spending, Abbott pioneered a system of shifting the budgetary burden onto the states and local health authorities, a blueprint that was further developed by the Rudd Labor government. Controversially, Abbott also blocked women's access to the abortion pill RU486.

By 2007, however, Howard had substantially lost the support of the ruling class, which accused him of backing away from the pro-market measures being implemented globally, and of indulging in populist "middle class welfare" to try to retain office. In the 2007 federal election, most of the media and corporate establishment swung behind Kevin Rudd, who pledged, as a "fiscal conservative," to cut government spending.

After the Howard government's defeat, Abbott sought to rewrite history, claiming to have opposed the hated WorkChoices industrial laws, which had contributed to the popular antagonism toward Howard's regime. In a 2009 book, *Battlelines*, effectively setting out his case for the Liberal leadership, Abbott described WorkChoices as a "political mistake," but not "an economic one." In other words, the policy of tearing up jobs, wages and conditions was correct, but poorly executed.

Battlelines restated Abbott's support for global "American leadership" and unequivocally defended the invasion of Iraq, despite its catastrophic human cost. In fact, he advocated stepping up Canberra's participation in US-led militarism. "It's wrong to expect America to be the world's policeman with only a token assistance from its allies," he wrote. "If Australia is to matter in the wider world, Australians should expect more, not less, future involvement in international security issues."

In that book, Abbott also foreshadowed the turn to austerity measures, aimed at forcing the working class to bear the burden of the worldwide economic meltdown that began in 2008. He criticised the scale of the stimulus measures launched by the Rudd government to bail out the financial markets, declaring "you can't spend your way out of a recession." Instead, he insisted, the slump had to be utilised to impose "reform," citing the example of the Hawke government, which had "used the recession of the early '80s to justify floating the dollar, deregulating the banks and lowering tariffs."

Abbott made clear his readiness to gut social spending in order to restore profits, declaring: "The global financial crisis will make the quest for lower, simpler taxes more urgent, not less." He set out a regressive welfare policy, including reinforced "work for the dole" requirements, tougher rules to force disabled people into employment and "automatic income management" of all "welfare

dependent families with children under sixteen." Taking direct control over how people spent their welfare benefits would "send the clearest possible message that people on welfare have obligations as well as entitlements."

Abbott also signalled his opposition to the emissions trading scheme (ETS) being negotiated between Rudd and the Liberals under the leadership of Malcolm Turnbull. Both Rudd and Turnbull, who has close connections with the financial elite, sought to generate a lucrative new market in emissions trading. Abbott, however, more aligned to the mining sector and smaller nationally-based industries, dismissed global warming and declared that it "didn't make sense" to "impose certain and substantial costs on the economy now, in order to avoid unknown and perhaps even benign changes in the future."

At the end of 2009, Abbott led a walkout by senior members of the shadow ministry over the ETS issue, culminating in his defeat of Turnbull by a single vote in the party room. As the new Liberal opposition leader, Abbott set about emulating Howard in pushing right-wing nationalist campaigns to divert mounting economic and social tensions, vowing to "stop" refugee boats, axe the "carbon tax" and boost spending on the military and "national security."

With the Labor government wracked by conflicts that culminated in the coup against Rudd in June 2010, and his replacement with Julia Gillard, and then Rudd's reinstallation in June 2013, the media and business elites swung behind Abbott, despite their vocal doubts about his willingness to impose a European-style social counter-revolution. Big business opposes Abbott's "Howard-style" parental leave scheme, which would impose a levy on large companies to provide six months' leave on full pay, up to \$150,000 a year, for all working mothers following childbirth.

Acutely conscious of the overwhelming opposition among ordinary people to the corporate agenda of austerity and militarism, Abbott spent the entire 2013 election campaign covering up the program that he was preparing to implement on behalf of the ruling class. Now that the election is out of the way, the business and media establishment has begun to bring forward its demands: with commodity prices falling and the mining investment boom collapsing, the incoming government must move rapidly to slash social spending, reduce corporate taxes, gut the public sector and impose more "flexible" workplace laws.

Abbott has wasted no time in underscoring his commitment to the US alliance, unequivocally backing the Obama administration's plans for war against Syria. He is under mounting corporate pressure to prove the same preparedness to push ahead with his government's domestic war against the working class.



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