

Four weeks after announcing austerity budget

Leadership tensions erupt in Australian government

Richard Phillips
6 June 2014

Leadership tensions have erupted in the Liberal-National coalition as opposition in the working class intensifies to the Abbott government's sweeping budget attacks on low-paid and middle income families, youth, pensioners, the unemployed and disabled, as it hands out tax cuts and concession to big business and the wealthy.

The conflict has taken the form of a war of words between Malcolm Turnbull, federal communications minister and former Liberal leader, and two of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's media supporters, Murdoch press columnist Andrew Bolt and right-wing Sydney radio "shock jock" Alan Jones. Turnbull, a former merchant banker, who has close relations with the finance and banking sector, was deposed by Abbott in late 2009.

Abbott and Treasurer Joe Hockey anticipated a groundswell of opposition to the budget, but calculated it would soon dissipate. Then they would commence the usual budget horse-trading in the Senate, where the government needs the support of six of the eight crossbenchers to pass its legislation. Their plan has been disrupted as popular anger mounts to the government's austerity attacks on welfare, public education and health, and to the social rights of virtually every layer of youth. Indicating the depth of hostility, the latest Newspan revealed that the government's primary vote had dropped to just 36 percent—a 4½-year low—and 10 points below the Labor opposition, just eight months after Labor was swept from office due to its anti-working class agenda.

The public clash between Turnbull and Abbott's two media backers began following a dinner at a Canberra restaurant on the night of May 28, attended by Turnbull, Treasury Secretary Martin Parkinson and billionaire Clive Palmer, head of the right-wing populist Palmer United Party (PUP), which has so far indicated it will not support the budget.

The Abbott camp, increasingly nervous about the growing crisis, and concerned that the prime minister might lose the backing of financial markets if he fails to get the budget through, decided to intervene by arranging for Abbott to appear on Andrew Bolt's TV talk show last Sunday morning.

Bolt and Abbott are known to be personal friends and the line of interview was clearly pre-arranged. The interview began with the right-wing commentator suggesting to the prime minister that Turnbull had "his eye on your job."

The next day, Bolt declared in his newspaper column that the Turnbull-Palmer dinner had "sent an unmistakable message to Liberal MPs: 'Replace Abbott with Turnbull as prime minister and maybe Palmer will play ball.'" He repeated this theme continuously in further newspaper and television comments.

Yesterday another Abbott friend, radio shock-jock Alan Jones, joined in, conducting his own fractious interview with Turnbull, and insisting that the communications minister publicly pledge an oath of loyalty to Abbott and to every measure in the government's budget. Turnbull refused but declared that he supported "unreservedly and wholeheartedly every element in the budget." He also claimed that the government was totally united but that Jones and Bolt were damaging the coalition "at a time when we are trying to sell a very difficult budget."

Last night Turnbull appeared on ABC-TV's "7.30" program and insisted that he had no plans to challenge Abbott. He nevertheless added "politics is an unpredictable business." Significantly Abbott, who is currently in Europe, has done nothing to quell the controversy.

While tensions between the Turnbull and Abbott factions continue to mount, there are growing concerns

throughout the entire political and media establishment that the mounting hostility among broad sections of the population to the budget is undermining parliamentary stability itself.

According to polling by Essential Research, nearly 50 percent of the population, including 9 percent of Coalition voters, want the opposition parties—Labor, the Greens and the minor parties—to vote down the budget as a whole in the Senate by refusing to pass the government’s financial appropriation bills, that is to “block supply.” Last Wednesday an online Fairfax media poll recorded 93 percent of 2,500 readers backing such a measure.

Such a vote would likely see the government fall. On Tuesday Andrew Wilkie, an independent MP from Tasmania, called on Labor, the Greens and the PUP to block the budget declaring that he had “never seen anything like the breadth and depth of concern and even anger.”

“If supply is blocked,” he told the federal parliament, “then we can go back to the polls where the people can decide this budget and indeed the government’s fate.”

Wilkie’s appeal for “blocking supply”—the method used to create the conditions for the extra-parliamentary coup that removed the Whitlam Labor government in 1975—is the first time the issue has been raised in parliament for decades.

Labor leader Bill Shorten is desperately manoeuvring to prop up not only the government, but the parliamentary setup as a whole. While he has feigned concern over aspects of the budget, he immediately rejected the Tasmanian MP’s appeal. Greens leader Christine Milne followed suit.

Expressing their fears, Labor MP Tim Watts declared that Australia’s “democratic institutions,” were “too important to trash for short-term political gain... Unseating the Abbott government should be a marathon, not a sprint,” he said.

In other words, Labor, for all its anti-budget posturing, will do everything it possibly can to ensure the Liberal-National coalition remains in power. The last thing the Labor Party wants is to come to power on a wave of working-class opposition to Abbott’s budget attacks. Its principal efforts are directed at winning the backing of finance capital by demonstrating that Labor, rather than the Liberal-National coalition, can best implement its agenda. Above all, Labor is attempting to corral opposition to the budget within the framework of parliamentary manoeuvres and prevent the development of an independent movement of the working class against

the government.

Abbott is well aware of his dependence on the Labor apparatus. During his interview with Bolt last Sunday, the right-wing commentator asked the prime minister what was the source of his “optimism” that the budget would largely pass. Abbott responded by recalling the critical role of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in “restructuring” the Australian economy in the 1980s and early 1990s.

“These were reforming Labor people and I don’t believe that the reform spirit is entirely dead in the contemporary Labor Party. There are sensible people in the Labor Party and in the end I’ll be appealing to them,” Abbott said.

The trade union bureaucracy, which has systematically imposed the corporate attacks on jobs, living standards and basic rights over the past three decades, is now moving in to play its role in containing working-class opposition. It has called a series of one-off anti-budget protests on June 12 in Sydney and Melbourne, with other protests planned in early July. The purpose of these events is to let off steam and, like the national March in May demonstrations last month, sow illusions in Labor and the Greens and divert the mounting anger into bankrupt demands for the return of a Labor government.

The pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, are supporting the unions and claiming that strikes and protests are needed to “pressure” Labor and the Greens to block supply and force a new election.

Deeply hostile to the development of an independent political movement of the working class armed with a socialist program, these outfits insist that the struggle for socialism is off the agenda for the foreseeable future and that the only alternative to Abbott is yet another Labor-Green government. This dead-end perspective is aimed at politically disorienting the working class and creating the time and political space for the ruling elite to make the necessary political adjustments for its budget to be implemented.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact