

Australian PM recommits to war and austerity

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott appears to have staved off an immediate push for his removal as leader of the Liberal Party following yesterday's address to the National Press Club, but the crisis surrounding his government will continue.

Abbott's speech came in the wake of last weekend's Queensland state election, which saw the ousting of the Liberal National Party government as a result of a growing wave of opposition throughout the working class to austerity and spending cuts. His address and responses to questions from journalists had one central objective: to convince the corporate and financial elites, as well as key media interests, in particular media baron Rupert Murdoch, that he was determined to press ahead with their demands to further cut the living standards of the working class.

At the same time, the prime minister scotched rumours that he might be persuaded to resign by warning the party room that he would not go quietly and that any forced removal would destabilise the entire government.

The speech began with the now stock-in-trade of bourgeois politicians around the world—lies and falsifications coupled with invocations of the bogus “war on terror” to justify militarism and deepening attacks on democratic rights. The ISIS “death cult,” Abbott said, had created “a new dark age” over much of Syria and Iraq and inspired the “terrorism” that had hit Melbourne and Sydney.

In fact the incidents to which he referred, the police killing of 17-year-old Numan Haider in Melbourne and the Lindt café siege in Sydney, had no relationship to ISIS, but arose from the actions of two disturbed individuals.

Abbott returned to this theme when he set out his agenda for the future, foreshadowing major attacks on democratic rights. He claimed people were sick of “Australian citizens” making excuses for Islamist fanatics in the Middle East and that he would be seeking new legislation to outlaw certain organisations.

“If cracking down on Hizb-ut-Tahrir and others who nurture extremism in our suburbs means further legislation, we will bring it on and I will demand that the Labor Party

call it for Australia.”

He made clear that the government's anti-terror legislation would go further. Police and security agencies had told him they needed access to telecommunications data to deal with a range of crimes and “they should always have the laws, money and support they need.”

While the invocation of the “war on terror” was part of the government's fear campaign, it also had a deeper significance. The development of more authoritarian forms of rule is part and parcel of the economic agenda directed against the working class that Abbott recommitted himself to impose.

He pointed to the economic stagnation in Europe, the slowest growth for a quarter of a century in Australia's economic locomotive, China, and the halving of the price of iron ore—Australia's biggest export—as evidence of “troubled times,” insisting that the government “is more determined than ever to make the changes our country needs.”

As always, when capitalist politicians speak of “our country” or “the nation,” they are outlining the demands and interests of the ruling elites, which insist that under worsening global economic conditions attacks on the living standards of the working class must be deepened.

At the centre of those “changes” is the slashing of social services—ending “the age of entitlement” as Treasurer Joe Hockey indicated in a speech almost three years ago—to cut the budget deficit. Setting out his agenda, Abbott said: “Our problem is not that taxes are too low; our problem is that government spending is too high.”

This was a guarantee to the corporate elites that the government would seek to meet their demands for lower “internationally competitive” tax rates and that it would not touch the massive concessions that have provided billions of dollars to the rich and super-rich.

In response to a question noting that two independent reports had found that the impact of last May's budget fell disproportionately on the lowest income earners, Abbott resorted to the twisted logic with which the government intends to try to justify its measures—the concept of

“intergenerational fairness” to rationalise greater inequality.

The greatest unfairness, he said, was to load future generations with deficit and debt. Reducing the deficit was therefore the “fair thing to do” and economic growth was the fastest way to return to surplus. In reality, under the profit system, in conditions of mounting global economic stagnation, any economic growth increasingly depends on lowering wages and social services, while boosting financial speculation—both of which widen social inequality.

At the same time, Abbott tried to deflect fears that the government’s forthcoming budget in May would intensify the cuts imposed last year. As much of the hard work had already been done, he said, “We won’t need to protect the Commonwealth budget at the expense of the household budget.”

This brought a rebuke from today’s *Financial Review* editorial, which attacked Abbott for “slipping back into his old pre-election habit of glossing over painful cuts and reforms when there is clearly more cutting to come.”

The Murdoch press, which played a significant role in sparking the leadership speculation, indicated its appreciation for Abbott’s recommitment to the austerity program it has demanded.

Today’s editorial in the *Australian* began by noting that Abbott “only gave a passing hat tip to those of his critics demanding contrition and malleability, preferring to channel his inner Margaret Thatcher and pronounce he was not for turning.”

While indicating that Abbott and his MPs had to do better, the editorial said he had provided a template for the “mission to constrain budget spending” and his government was the only sensible choice.

However, the unease within the Liberal Party room, among cabinet members as well as backbenchers, over Abbott’s leadership—brought to a head following the Queensland state election defeat—has not gone away.

Asked specifically whether he still had the confidence of the party room, Abbott only dealt with the question when specifically pressed and then only to make a threat. Acknowledging, in response to questions from journalists, that the government had had a “rough couple of months” and that some MPs were not supporting him, he continued: “When things are difficult the last thing you want to do is make a difficult situation worse.”

In response to an earlier question, Abbott insisted that, while party rooms chose leaders, once parties had gone to an election, things changed and it was “the people” that hired and fired.

In other words, Abbott was telegraphing to the party room he would not go easily and that his removal would only lead to the type of turbulence that had characterised the previous

Labor government’s Rudd-Gillard conflict, making a bad situation for the government worse. While these considerations may stay the hand of some of his internal opponents, the concept of *après moi le deluge* does not represent the firmest foundation for his leadership.

Seeking to assuage criticism from within Liberal ranks, Abbott promised that there would be no more “captain’s picks” of the type that led him to offer a knighthood to the Queen’s consort, the Duke of Edinburgh, sparking widespread condemnations of his judgement and contributing to leadership tensions. He also promised to be more “collegial and consultative.” As one journalist noted during question time, such a commitment had been delivered on 12–15 previous occasions.

While promising to eschew individual actions on secondary issues, Abbott made clear there was one area in which he would act unilaterally—foreign and security policy. Citing his denunciation of Russia over the bringing down of Malaysian Airlines MH 17 last July, he said that was the type of “captain’s call” he would continue to make in the future.

The example is revealing of another central plank of the government—its unswerving commitment to the agenda of US militarism. Abbott’s initial response to the downing of MH17 was to declare that the situation was unclear. Only hours later, however, after consultations with officials of the Obama administration, he became Washington’s leading international attack dog over the issue, culminating in his threat to “shirt front” Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Brisbane G20 summit.

Abbott’s National Press Club address was an assertion that, notwithstanding deepening popular opposition, war and austerity will remain the foundation of his government’s agenda.



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