

Factional rival Turnbull publicly condemns policies of Australian prime minister

James Cogan
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Communications Minister and former Liberal Party leader Malcolm Turnbull delivered a speech last night that implicitly criticised Prime Minister Tony Abbott's attempts to justify the government's sweeping attacks on democratic rights and its embroilment in US-led wars in the Middle East and war preparations in Asia.

Virtually every section of the Australian media has drawn attention to the speech, giving prominence to the challenge by Turnbull to Abbott's authority and leadership. It was delivered within the context of growing acrimony in corporate circles over the government's response to a rapidly worsening economic crisis and mounting concern over the implications of Australia's unconditional alignment with US foreign policy.

Turnbull's remarks to the Sydney Institute were entitled "Magna Carta and the Rule of Law in the Digital Age." On a range of issues, he staked out points of difference with the government, of which he is a senior minister.

Official Australian politics has been dominated for weeks by controversies stemming from a proposal by Abbott to grant the immigration minister the power to strip dual nationals accused of terrorism of their Australian citizenship, without any recourse to a court.

On June 19, Abbott defended his proposal to sideline the courts, declaring: "What happens if they get off? That's the problem. We all know there are evidentiary problems."

In remarks clearly directed at the prime minister, Turnbull said, at the conclusion of his speech: "We should always shudder a little, perhaps a lot, when cynics sneer at courts and laws as just troublesome obstacles standing in the way of justice."

Most significantly, Turnbull indirectly ridiculed Abbott's hysterical rhetoric that Australia is "at war" with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and under continuous threat from terrorism. Turnbull insisted it was "equally important not to overestimate that threat." Referring to ISIS propaganda that "before long they will be stabling their horses in the Vatican," he said, again in a clear reference to Abbott, "we should be careful not to say or do things which

can be seen to add credibility to those delusions."

In one of his most controversial criticisms, Turnbull asserted that "mistakes" like the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and "tough" anti-terrorism measures domestically, were assisting ISIS. "The Islamic terrorist," he declared, "seeks to provoke the state to overact because it creates a more receptive environment for the extremists' recruiting efforts."

This was an extraordinary remark, given the Abbott-fuelled furore that has dominated domestic politics during the past weeks.

On June 22, Zaky Mallah, who was charged with terrorism but found not guilty by a court, made essentially the same criticism on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) "Q&A" current affairs program. After a government representative, Steve Ciobo, responded by declaring that he would be "pleased" to see Mallah stripped of his citizenship, despite his innocence, the young man replied by saying it was such policies that encouraged people to join ISIS.

For his remarks, Mallah was accused of being a "terrorist sympathiser," while government representatives denounced the ABC for facilitating "terrorist recruitment." Abbott accused the ABC of "betrayal" and demanded it answer "whose side are you on?" It remains to be seen whether Abbott, or any of the reactionary cabal backing him, will damn Turnbull as a "terrorist" apologist or demand to know whose side he is on.

At the time, Turnbull pointedly condemned Mallah's appearance on "Q&A," but on the grounds of security, not because of what he had said. Despite being at the forefront of the anti-democratic campaign against the ABC, however, he cynically sought to score points against Abbott by asserting last night: "The government cannot direct the media how to do its job." He is also seeking to boost his profile by refusing to say whether or not he will obey Abbott's directive that senior ministers not appear on the "Q&A" program.

In addition, Turnbull used the opportunity of his speech to take a swipe at those layers of the Australian establishment who portray China as an expansionist, aggressive power on

par with Nazi Germany, declaring that Beijing “does not seek to export its way of government.”

The claim that China is the country’s greatest long-term threat has become the ideological underpinning of Australia’s strategic alliance with the United States, the expansion of US bases in the country, and Canberra’s participation in preparations for a military confrontation with Beijing. American and Australian warships, aircraft and troops are currently involved in the Talisman Sabre exercise, rehearsing the waging of a war against China in the South China Sea.

Turnbull has periodically articulated the views of that wing of the Australian ruling class which is deeply alarmed by the provocative US drive to undermine Chinese influence in Asia. China is Australia’s largest trading partner as well as a growing source of investment. It is also being held up as the most lucrative future market for Australian service industries—particularly the finance sector, with which Turnbull, as a former merchant banker, has particularly close links. While defending the US alliance, he has in the past argued that Australian commercial interests would be best served if Washington toned down its hard-line stance against Beijing.

Throughout the speech, Turnbull sought to portray himself as a cultured “liberal” statesman and defender of democratic rights, whose recent opposition, within his party room, had ensured that any person stripped of citizenship would have “full recourse to the Australian courts.” In fact, the planned legislation, which Turnbull played a role in drafting and the Labor opposition has supported, does nothing of the sort. It bestows draconian powers on the state to strip citizens of their rights (see: “Australian government unveils bill to revoke citizenship by ministerial decree”).

The character of Turnbull’s remarks last night suggests he is receiving growing support, within both the Liberal Party and the broader corporate and political establishment, for an attempt to oust Abbott as Liberal leader and prime minister.

The Abbott government is effectively paralysed less than two years after it was elected. Its attempts to push through deeper cutbacks to social spending and welfare have provoked immense anger in the working class, which has already been suffering from the impact of austerity measures imposed by the former Labor government, along with falling real wages and endemic youth unemployment.

Fearful of the extent of social tensions, Abbott has backed away from his economic agenda, while seeking to suppress any opposition to his government policies, through anti-democratic attacks on whistle-blowers and condemnation of any section of the media that offers even the mildest criticism. He has sought to develop a base of support through anti-terrorism hysteria, anti-refugee xenophobia and

attempts to implicate the Labor opposition in various scandals. These efforts, however, have failed to lift the government’s standing, with opinion polling showing mass alienation from both the government and the Labor opposition. Any election would have the most unpredictable and volatile outcome.

Leading business commentator Alan Kohler authored a scathing comment on the state of affairs in today’s *Australian*, headlined “Vanishing political capital an economic disaster.” He wrote: “Economic reform, already difficult, is now out of the question. A change of government wouldn’t help, and won’t happen anyway...”

Venting the rage of the corporate elite, Kohler named the issues it wants addressed: corporate and income tax cuts, the elimination of superannuation tax concessions, and increased government infrastructure investment, paid for by savage austerity cuts to health and welfare spending. Otherwise, he warned, as investment falls, exports collapse and trade and budget deficits blow out, the Australian dollar could go “off a cliff.”

Any attempt to implement such measures would face a groundswell of working class resistance. Turnbull, the merchant banker, with the “liberal” persona of support for an Australian republic, climate change action and gay marriage, is offering himself to the establishment as a better vehicle than a demagogue like Abbott for pushing through the agenda of big business.

If Abbott does not soon begin to address corporate concerns, Turnbull may well be handed the poisoned chalice of trying to stave off a social explosion, while imposing ever deeper austerity and presiding over the drift toward war.



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