

Rumours of leadership spill resurface around Australian government

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Media reports and speculation about a new challenge to the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Abbott are engulfing his Liberal-National Coalition government, bringing to a head a deep political crisis.

“It looks increasingly likely the Prime Minister will face a leadership spill before the year is out,” the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported this morning. By some accounts, Abbott could confront a bid to remove him as early as this week, on the eve of a crucial by-election in Western Australia on Saturday.

For months, Abbott has been under mounting pressure from the financial and corporate establishment over his government’s failure to impose sufficiently savage austerity measures and undertake an all-out offensive against workers’ wages and conditions. Key budget cuts remain stalled in parliament because of intense public hostility to the government’s policies.

Over recent weeks the government crisis has been compounded by a sharp reversal in the fortunes of Australian capitalism, with the worsening downturn in its largest single export market, China, and the consequent unraveling of the two-decades-long mining boom.

At the same time, hostility and resentment toward the government, on the part of the majority of the population, has been aggravated by declining real wages, falling living standards and a renewed barrage of job cuts throughout the mining, steel, auto, electricity, waterfront and engineering industries. Abbott also confronts growing popular opposition to his brutal treatment of refugees and recent decision to expand Australia’s involvement in the US-led war in the Middle East from Iraq into Syria.

News of high-level leaks from within the government emerged over the weekend, following detailed reports that Abbott was planning to purge six cabinet ministers.

Yesterday it was reported that Abbott had told media magnate Rupert Murdoch he was considering calling a snap general election, involving the “double dissolution” of both houses of parliament.

This followed a series of tweets from Murdoch on September 3 venting his frustration—and that of key sections of the financial elite—with the political logjam in the Australian parliament over budget measures, and demanding an early election in a bid to overcome it. In his tweets, Murdoch declared that the country was becoming “almost ungovernable” and the “govt must push on with reforms for sake of all sides or hold snap poll.”

Murdoch, who owns most of the country’s daily newspapers, went on to tweet: “Only hope is new poll with govt of all the talents ready to work together with clear mandate for reform, bringing in new, young able people.”

With the government and Abbott himself facing continuing record lows in opinion polls, many government ministers would likely lose their seats in an early election. Moreover, due to the vagaries of the Australian electoral system, the current levels of political disaffection could result in many minor parties and candidates gaining extra seats, particularly in the Senate, at the expense of Abbott’s coalition, the Labor Party and the Greens.

“Senior Liberals were astounded at the idea,” declared this morning’s *Guardian*. The ABC today cited six unnamed government ministers saying Abbott was certain to be challenged. “He should just resign,” one told the ABC. “He has had six months and things have gone from bad to worse.”

The “six months” was a reference to Abbott’s narrow survival of a revolt by members of his Liberal Party last February, by 61 votes to 39. In the course of the poll, a

majority of non-ministers in the party room had voted to remove him. After what he described as this “near-death” experience, Abbott pleaded to be given six months to improve the government’s political stocks. In the event, its standing has only deteriorated.

Ironically, the upcoming by-election in the Western Australian seat of Canning this coming Saturday was caused by the death of Don Randall, one of the sponsors of the February motion to oust Abbott. Canning, a mixture of outer suburbs and semi-rural areas south of Perth, the state capital, is a microcosm of the economic and social devastation being inflicted on wide layers of the working class.

Unemployment is soaring in Western Australia, a former “mining boom” state, and the Mandurah region, which covers Canning, has the highest official jobless rate in the state—10.8 percent. Mandurah’s residents include an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 former “fly-in, fly-out” mine workers, who used to supply much of the labour power from which the mining companies extracted massive profits. The region is one of the 10 worst in the country for unemployment among youth—with an official rate near 20 percent among 15- to 24-year-olds.

In a bid to divert class tensions into the reactionary channels of militarism, fears of Islamic terrorism and an impending “invasion” of refugees, the Liberal Party selected as its candidate Andrew Hastie, an ex-SAS officer. Hastie commanded front-line troops in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, including a unit that cut off the hands of the individuals they killed, and later became an adviser to Operation Sovereign Borders, the government’s ongoing military campaign to repel asylum seekers’ boats.

According to the most recent media polling, however, the government is likely to suffer a considerable swing of up to 10 percent against it in the by-election, and could lose what has been a “safe” Liberal seat. A national swing of that dimension would see the coalition government lose the next election.

While the opposition Labor Party could be the initial beneficiary of such a result, it is also despised by masses of ordinary working people. Labor leader, Bill Shorten, a long-time trade union bureaucrat and senior minister in the previous Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, has collaborated for years with the major corporations in the ongoing assault on jobs, wages and

conditions.

Shorten is also a key ally of Washington and has fully supported the Abbott government’s escalating involvement in the Middle East war, as well as its repulsion of refugees and battery of so-called counter-terrorism measures overturning basic legal and democratic rights.

The crisis facing the Abbott government represents a continuation and deepening of the instability that has dominated the Australian political establishment over the past five years. In 2010, the US-supported coup against former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in the midst of his first-term in office, and his replacement by Julia Gillard, initiated a series of political upheavals that resulted in the country’s first minority government since the Great Depression, and a total of three prime ministers in the ensuing three years.

Amid the intensifying turmoil surrounding the Liberal-National government, the Labor, trade union and Greens leaders, supported by the various pseudo-left organisations, are working to channel opposition to Abbott back behind the election of yet another Labor government. At a pro-refugee rally in Sydney last Saturday, prominent Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon was given the microphone to appeal to participants to “throw out Abbott, and give some backbone to Labor and get more decent people into parliament.”

Like the Rudd and Gillard administrations before it, such a government would only continue and intensify the agenda of austerity, militarism and police-state measures, being implemented by the ruling elites around the world, aimed directly against the working class.



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