

Ex-minister's defection highlights fragility of Australian government

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal-National government is facing worsening fallout from two ruptures that erupted during last week's final days of parliament for 2015.

Less than three months after Turnbull orchestrated a Liberal Party backroom coup to oust his predecessor Tony Abbott, the efforts of the corporate media to promote the former merchant banker, by depicting him as a popular and unifying figure, are showing signs of unravelling.

First, last Thursday, former industry minister Ian MacFarlane, whom Turnbull dropped from the cabinet after ousting Abbott in mid-September, announced that he was switching from the Liberals to the rural-based Nationals. This evidently followed weeks of talks involving National Party leader Warren Truss, who is deputy prime minister, and deputy Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce, who is the agriculture minister.

Following MacFarlane's announcement, Truss held a meeting with Turnbull, insisting that the realignment meant the Nationals, under the coalition pact, were entitled to an extra cabinet post at the expense of the Liberals. MacFarlane is reportedly seeking to return to the ministry via this manoeuvre.

MacFarlane's decision to shift camp to the Nationals after nearly two decades in parliament as a Liberal has no immediate effect on the government's majority in parliament—because the two parties have a formal coalition agreement. But it points to rifts within the government and its ongoing fragility.

Some idea of the destabilising impact came over the weekend, when Turnbull and two leading ministers from MacFarlane's home state of Queensland struck back publicly. Turnbull pulled out of a planned media event with MacFarlane, and Attorney-General George Brandis and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton both

denounced MacFarlane.

"No backbencher can force a Cabinet reshuffle on a prime minister by swapping parties in order to game the system," Brandis declared. The attorney general alleged that MacFarlane had been planning to defect for weeks, but remained silent when he was re-endorsed as a Liberal Party election candidate just a fortnight ago.

Both cabinet ministers called on the state executive of Queensland's supposedly unified Liberal National Party to strip MacFarlane of his electoral pre-selection when it meets next Monday, a step that could further inflame the conflicts within the Coalition.

Even as the conflict over MacFarlane erupted, Turnbull was desperately fending off calls for him to dismiss Special Minister of State Mal Brough, who was a key numbers man in the plot that removed Abbott.

Turnbull appointed Brough to this ministerial post—which is meant to monitor integrity within the government—despite Brough being a subject of an Australian Federal Police inquiry into the 2012 leaking of information from the diary of Labor government-appointed parliamentary speaker Peter Slipper.

Last week, Brough made conflicting statements over whether he asked James Ashby, a member of Slipper's staff, to procure the material, which was exploited to force Slipper to resign in late 2012. Nevertheless, Turnbull again defended Brough on the final parliamentary sitting day last Thursday, in the hope of deflecting the issue until parliament resumes in February.

Behind these conflicts lie divisions within the Liberal-National Coalition reflecting divergent interests within the Australian capitalist class that are being widened by the worsening economic slump. These range from finance capital, personified by Turnbull, the multi-millionaire ex-Goldman Sachs partner, to the mining

sector, which is hard hit by the collapse of the mining boom, and sections of manufacturing and rural industry that have traditionally relied on tariffs to survive.

When Turnbull was installed, by a majority of 54 votes to 44 votes in the Liberal Party parliamentary caucus, the 20 MPs from the National Party, many of whom supported Abbott, had no vote. In return for accepting the leadership shift, the Nationals forced Turnbull to sign a new coalition agreement that made significant concessions to the National Party.

As a former industry minister and farmers' lobby group leader, MacFarlane is identified with protectionist elements within the agricultural and manufacturing industries that have been badly affected by the dismantling of national-based regulation over the past three decades.

During MacFarlane's term as industry minister, he reportedly initially opposed the Abbott government's decision to withdraw subsidies from the car manufacturing industry, which became a factor in the decision of Ford, General Motors and Toyota to end all production in Australia.

Today's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* reflected these driving forces and conflicts. While insisting that Turnbull had to "resolve the Brough and MacFarlane issues," it was equally adamant that he "must not indulge protectionist policies that hamper his overall quest to restore Australia's economic growth prospects."

The editorial was just one of the commentaries expressing concerns about Turnbull's ability to carry through the agenda that Abbott failed to impose—the slashing of social spending and corporate taxes amid the sharp reversal of the fortunes of Australian capitalism.

Today's *Australian* editorial warned Turnbull that "disunity is death" and urged him to repair relations with the Nationals and Abbott's supporters.

The newspaper's foreign editor Greg Sheridan noted that while Turnbull was "doing so well" in the media's opinion polls, "his position is much more fragile than it seems." In particular, Sheridan commented: "The government has not yet taken any tough economic decisions, but Australia's circumstances surely require this."

Sheridan urged Turnbull to bring Abbott into his cabinet in an effort to re-unify the government.

Sheridan, who has close relations with Washington, also pointed to another factor fuelling tensions within the government. He noted that Abbott's recent suggestion of sending ground troops into Iraq and Syria, which was dismissed by Turnbull's ministers, was in line with last week's decision by the Obama administration to dispatch special forces to Syria.

The concern in US ruling circles is that Turnbull, while supporting the American alliance, is not as unconditionally aligned as Abbott to US militarism and the "pivot to Asia" to confront China. Obama privately chastised Turnbull last month at an Asian summit for not giving the White House a "heads up" that a Chinese company was about to be handed a lease over the strategic northern port of Darwin.

The rifts within the Coalition reflect the increasing volatility of parliamentary politics under the strains of economic crisis and rising geo-political tensions. Both the major parties, the Coalition and Labor, are widely discredited because of their bipartisan program of austerity, commitment to US-led wars and dismantling of basic legal and democratic rights on the pretext of fighting terrorism.

Counting Prime Minister John Howard, who lost his own parliamentary seat in the 2007 landslide defeat of his Coalition government, five prime ministers have been ousted within eight years, and Turnbull could follow. Yet, to use Sheridan's words, the financial and corporate elite is demanding "tough economic decisions." This means deepening attacks on the jobs, wages, conditions and social rights of the working class, which will inflame major struggles against the government, regardless of the immediate fates of MacFarlane and Brough.



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