

Australian government to call an extraordinary “double dissolution” election

Mike Head
19 April 2016

After just seven months in office, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull today announced he would ask the governor-general—the head of state—for a “double dissolution” election for all seats in both houses of parliament, “most likely” to be held on July 2.

At his media conference, Turnbull said it was his intention to make a formal request to the governor-general to dissolve the House of Representatives and the Senate for such an election once the government had delivered the annual budget, which has been brought forward to May 3.

As a result, Australia is facing the first double dissolution election in three decades, and only the seventh since the country was established as a federation in 1901. Normally only half the Senate, the upper house of parliament, is up for re-election.

The Liberal-National Coalition government’s manoeuvre is a desperate attempt to break the parliamentary logjam in which its austerity measures have been blocked by the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, along with so-called independents or crossbenchers.

Amid a worsening economic situation, the government has been under intense pressure from the corporate and financial elite to slash social spending and conduct a broad offensive against wages and working conditions. At the same time, it faces intense popular opposition to further inroads into living standards, which the opposition parties and crossbenchers are seeking to exploit.

The immediate pretext for the election was a vote by the Senate yesterday for the second time to reject a government bill directed against construction workers. This gave the government the constitutional trigger—two rejections of a bill passed by the lower

house—it needed to call such an election.

Turnbull set the stage for yesterday’s parliamentary sitting via a proclamation issued on March 21 by the governor-general, recalling parliament for an unscheduled three-week session to demand that the Senate pass the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) Bill, or face a double dissolution.

By 36 votes to 34, the Senate last night rejected Turnbull’s ultimatum. Only hours after the parliament reconvened, four so-called independent senators joined Labor and Greens to defeat the bill, which would reestablish a body with draconian powers to interrogate construction workers, under threat of imprisonment, for taking any form of industrial action.

The selection of the ABCC bill as a double dissolution trigger is a warning of the government’s underlying agenda. While presented as a measure directed against the construction trade unions, the bill is aimed squarely at building workers themselves. It is part of the government’s attempt to address the demands of big business for a wider offensive against workers’ conditions and basic legal and democratic rights.

Immediately prior to the March 21 proclamation, the Turnbull government, supported by the Greens in the Senate, pushed through changes to electoral laws designed to make it more difficult for minor parties and independents to win seats in the upper house. The aim is to purge the Senate of crossbench senators.

Turnbull’s manoeuvres could seriously backfire, however. Half a year after Turnbull deposed his predecessor Tony Abbott, who had failed to break through the political impasse, the Coalition government is increasingly discredited and unpopular. The election could well result in another “hung” parliament like that of 2010–13, with neither the Coalition nor Labor able

to gain a majority in the House of Representatives, or a Labor victory.

Moreover, a double dissolution election will halve the statewide quota of votes normally needed to win a Senate seat, lowering it from about 14 percent to 7 percent of voters. Despite last month's changes to the electoral laws, this could result in a greater number of "crossbench" senators being elected.

The extraordinary election move points to an intensifying political crisis. Not only is the government facing demands from big business for tough austerity measures, but it is under pressure from Washington to play a more aggressive role in the US "pivot to Asia" against China. In particular, the US is pressing for the Australian military to join in so-called "freedom of navigation" operations to directly challenge Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

These demands have only intensified the dilemma confronting the Australian ruling class which is heavily reliant on China as its biggest export market, but remains dependent on the US as its longstanding ally to defend its strategic interests. Turnbull has just returned from his first trip to China as prime minister where he had to walk a fine line between promoting Australian business interests while at the same time toeing Washington's line on the "pivot."

Yesterday, however, Turnbull underscored the government's agreement with Washington to meet another US demand, for increased military spending. On the first day of what has effectively become a 10-week election campaign, he announced the local construction of a new fleet of naval patrol boats.

The government and the media presented this as a "jobs" announcement. Turnbull declared that the boat contracts would "directly secure" more than 2,500 jobs for decades in South Australia and Western Australia. It was blatant pork-barrelling in two states where the Coalition fears heavy electoral defeats.

But the announcement is also part of a \$40 billion commitment to build 42 new warships, including frigates, over the next decade. Within weeks, the government is also expected to name the successful bidder from competing Japanese, German and French contractors to build a \$50 billion new submarine fleet.

Throughout the election campaign, every effort will be made by the political and media establishment to continue burying from public view the US preparations

for war against China, and Washington's escalating pressure on the Australian government to step up its involvement in the confrontation.

Nevertheless, the naval shipbuilding program is a warning that, amid the political crisis, the danger of war is escalating. In recent months, Labor has publicly called for Australian warships and planes to participate in the US-led "freedom of navigation" operations against China.

For electoral purposes, Labor, which began the slashing of health, education and welfare under the 2007–13 governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, is attempting to capitalise on the popular discontent by making an anti-austerity pitch.

Labor leader Bill Shorten yesterday declared that Labor stood for "decent jobs," "better schools" and healthcare, not "vested interests and the big banks." In reality, Labor has assured the financial markets that it is committed to austerity. In response to last week's warning of a credit rating downgrade by Moody's, shadow treasurer Chris Bowen swiftly pledged to heed the message and take the "tough decisions" needed on revenue and spending.

In a revealing incident yesterday, Shorten was compelled to join the chorus of condemnation of one of his senior shadow ministers, Steven Conroy, for criticising the role of Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove in using his constitutional powers to summons the parliament to re-assemble yesterday.

Conroy had raised the spectre of former Governor-General Sir John Kerr, who invoked the "reserve powers" of the British monarchy to dismiss the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. Shorten sprang to Cosgrove's defence, saying: "The governor-general has one of the most important roles in our democracy and that should be respected by everyone."

The extreme sensitivity of the political establishment to any reference to the 1975 coup is an indication of the depth of the current crisis and the recognition in ruling circles that the broad, undemocratic powers held by the governor-general might have to be used again.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact