Australian government shaken by defeats in parliament

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Just two days after the Australian parliament resumed for the first time since the July 2 election, the narrowly-returned Turnbull government's tenuous hold on office suffered another blow last night when it lost a series of votes in the House of Representatives.

The Liberal-National Coalition government became the first majority government to suffer a defeat in the lower house for five decades. In 1962, Robert Menzies's Coalition government—which like Malcolm Turnbull's held just a one-seat majority—lost a number of votes, and was forced to call an early election the following year.

Between 2010 and 2013, the minority Greens-backed Labor government lost numerous votes, but avoided defeats on motions of confidence until it was thrown out of office by an electoral landslide in 2013.

While last night's defeats, on three procedural motions, were not fatal, in themselves, to the current government's survival, they have underscored its instability. They highlight the fragility of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's position and signal the possibility of more serious defeats in coming months.

Three senior ministers, two of whom are known supporters of Tony Abbott - the former prime minister ousted by Turnbull last September - were among several government MPs absent from the chamber. This gave Labor and other opposition members a majority for almost three hours, before enough Coalition MPs returned to adjourn the house, which will not sit again until September 12.

In the meantime, there were chaotic scenes as government ministers and others scurried back from Canberra airport, or flew back to the capital, to give Turnbull the numbers he needed to scuttle a Labor motion to establish a royal commission into the banking and financial services industry. At one point, when the vote was tied at 71-all, the house speaker used his casting vote to extend the debate until enough government members had returned to shut down the proceedings.

This morning, the leader of government business in the lower house, Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne, tried to dismiss the events as a mere "stuff up." Turnbull, however, revealed his alarm, declaring in a radio interview that he had "read the riot act" to the absent ministers. In an indication of the rifts gripping the government, he said: "They've been caught out, they've been embarrassed, they've been humiliated, they've been excoriated, and it won't happen again."

Having barely survived the July 2 election, Turnbull began the week by declaring that "this will be a term of delivery." He vowed to eliminate the budget deficit, boost military spending and strengthen the "national security" apparatus.

The government is under intense pressure from the financial markets and the corporate elite to slash welfare, healthcare, education and other social spending, and from the Obama administration to commit itself to militarily challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea (see: "Australian Labor senator branded a 'Manchurian candidate'")

The opening three days of the new parliament, however, became a debacle, throwing increased doubt over the government's capacity to impose this agenda.

The turmoil began on Wednesday, the first full day of the parliamentary session, when Labor's call for a banking royal commission was defeated in the lower house by the narrowest possible margin—75 to 73. Even to secure that win, Turnbull had to politically back-pedal.

Several government MPs, particularly from the rural-

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based National Party, threatened to cross the floor to back Labor's bill. This forced Turnbull to make a series of concessions to their demands for inquiries into predatory bank practices, which have driven a number of investment funds, businesses and farmers into liquidation. Among these concessions, the prime minister promised an inquiry by the financial ombudsman and a tribunal to hear the victims' grievances.

Labor's bill was later passed by the Senate, one of three defeats for the government on Wednesday and Thursday in the upper house, where it holds only 30 of the 76 seats. Labor gained the backing of some of the 11 "crossbench" senators—mostly right-wing populists—who won seats on July 2 by professing to oppose the three main establishment parties, the Coalition, Labor and the Greens.

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten then brought the royal commission bill back into the House of Representatives late yesterday afternoon, triggering last night's parliamentary chaos.

The loss of control over parliament, even temporarily, has been portrayed by the Labor opposition as vindicating Abbott's criticism earlier in the week that the government was "in office but not actually running the country." Abbott, who is regarded as more committed than Turnbull to meeting Washington's demands, is clearly positioning himself for a possible return to the prime ministership.

Shorten's manoeuvre was itself politically desperate, on a number of levels. In the first place, a banking inquiry will do nothing to curtail, let alone end, the rapacious activities of the banks and finance houses, whose profits have soared since the 2008 global financial crisis at the direct expense of working people. Rather, it would whitewash the abuses, as part of Labor's wider bid, assisted by the Greens, to divert rising popular hostility toward worsening social inequality back into the parliamentary framework.

By pushing the banking bill, Shorten is also frantically trying to shore up his own leadership. Extracts released this week from a new book on Turnbull's ouster of Abbott confirmed that moves were underfoot twice this year to remove Shorten as Labor leader, in favour of former deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese, who almost beat Shorten for the Labor leadership in a ballot after its 2013 election loss.

Plans were hatched among Labor's factional bosses, first in January this year and then just after the July 2 election, to instal Albanese, a member of Labor's nominally "left" faction, as a means of boosting Labor's electoral support, which remains at near record low levels.

These developments underscore the crisis of the two-party parliamentary system that has been maintained for most of the period since Australia's federation in 1901. Each of the establishment parties is already discredited in the eyes of millions of people, after decades of implementing the dictates of the financial elite, at the expense of the jobs, working conditions and basic services of the working class.

A recent analysis of the July 2 election results by former Labor senator John Black, pointed to "existential threats" to both the Liberal and Labor parties, with their traditional constituencies turning against them and their votes—at 28.7 percent and 34.7 percent respectively—barely above historic lows. Only 16 Labor MPs out of 69 won their seats on first preference votes. As for the Greens, they are increasingly dependent on "high-income professionals" and other well-off inner suburban ex-Liberal voters.

These parties are now seeking to impose an even more savage program of budget cuts and militarism, driven by a deepening global slump, the implosion of Australian capitalism's mining boom and the mounting geo-strategic tensions generated by Washington's military and economic "pivot to Asia" to confront China.

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