

Knives out for Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull

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Barely two months after Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull led the Liberal and National Party Coalition to the barest of victories in the July 2 election, his leadership is being called into question.

On September 3, the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR), the country's leading business newspaper, published allegations that the Australian intelligence agencies believe the prime minister "isn't taking their warnings about the security threat posed by China seriously enough." Turnbull's attitude was directly linked to his previous business relations in China and statements he made in 2011 questioning the aggressive US policy toward Beijing. An unnamed source claimed that there was so little trust that the intelligence agencies were "hesitant" about reporting issues involving China to Turnbull and his senior ministers.

The AFR claims are part of a hysterical focus throughout the media on Chinese "agents of influence" in Australian society. Peter Hartcher, the international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, called yesterday for a campaign to purge the "rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows"—namely politicians, former politicians and academics, business people and Chinese Australians allegedly bought off by Chinese "soft power" or who, because of their Chinese background, owe allegiance to a "foreign power."

If the AFR sources are accurate, the intelligence agencies count Turnbull among the "rats." Australian intelligence officials work in daily collaboration with their American counterparts. If they have concerns over Turnbull, then so does the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA.

The political atmosphere resembles that prior to the June 23–24, 2010 political coup within the Labor Party government that removed Kevin Rudd as prime minister and installed Julia Gillard—with one important

difference. Concrete evidence, in the form of leaked diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, that the Obama administration viewed Rudd as unreliable in regard to US plans for a confrontational stance against China did not emerge for months after his ousting. In the case of Turnbull, these concerns are out in the open.

US involvement in any move against Turnbull was clearly hinted at by the AFR. An unnamed contractor with "close links to the intelligence services" stated: "He [Turnbull] is probably the first time since Whitlam where we have had a prime minister where we don't know where he stands on national security grounds."

The Labor government headed by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was removed from power on November 11, 1975 in a constitutional coup by the governor-general and the opposition parties, operating in close collaboration with the Australian security apparatus, and US and British intelligence agencies. Whitlam and Labor were deemed to be incapable of holding back a volatile strike movement in the working class. In the wake of the crimes of the Vietnam War, millions of Australian workers and youth were deeply opposed to militarism and the US-Australia strategic alliance. A fear in US ruling circles was that Labor would adapt to the anti-war sentiment and order the closure of the key American spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia.

In 2016, Turnbull's government is widely viewed in ruling class circles as too weak and divided to impose the devastating cutbacks to working-class living standards and social spending that are being demanded as the economic slump worsens internationally and within Australia. On foreign policy, US imperialism expects its Australian ally to be on the frontline of escalating military operations that could trigger open conflict with Beijing. To date, despite US appeals,

Turnbull has not permitted the Australian Navy to carry out a “freedom of navigation” incursion inside the 12-mile territorial limits around Chinese-held islets in the South China Sea.

Turnbull is under attack over his foreign and domestic policy by media commentators who are known to support Tony Abbott, the former prime minister whom Turnbull ousted on September 14, 2015 in a Liberal Party leadership challenge.

Andrew Bolt, a right-wing columnist for the Murdoch-owned newspapers who also hosts “The Bolt Report” on Sky News television, wrote a scathing article on September 5.

After quoting the AFR allegations about Turnbull’s relations with China, Bolt labelled him “a clueless egotist who has achieved not one thing of importance in the year since he became prime minister.” He described all Turnbull’s economic policies as “doomed to die in the hostile Senate,” the upper house of parliament where the government holds only 30 out of 76 seats.

In language similar to that used by Labor Party figures to justify removing Rudd, Bolt declared that “some of Turnbull’s errors come from this fragile man’s desperate desire to be the smartest person in the room.”

Bolt concluded his rant: “So, confused and frozen with indecision, frustrated and angry, Turnbull must watch as his personal popularity plummets and his authority melts... Still, I never thought he was a leader. The question now is how long will he be?”

Over recent days, Turnbull has been attending the G20 summit in China, and now the East Asia Forum with ASEAN leaders in Laos. In a series of public statements, he appears to have gone out of his way to try to solidarise himself with the US, and differ with Beijing on its South China Sea claims and trade and investment issues.

In significant remarks at the G20, Turnbull effectively repudiated his assessment that China would inevitably emerge as the dominant power in Asia due to American decline. This view had been central to his criticisms of the US “pivot to Asia” when President Barack Obama first announced it on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011. Last Sunday, however, Turnbull stated: “I’m looking forward into the middle of the century and beyond, the United States, the force of the United States, its presence, its

stature, its military power, its economic power, will be a leading force in this region and its military superiority cannot be overtaken.”

In an apparent bid to raise the stakes, Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten declared yesterday he was “absolutely resolute about supporting the right of the Australian Navy to have freedom of navigation exercises” in the South China Sea. In fact, it was the first time Shorten explicitly endorsed such an operation. Previously, he left it to former Labor defence spokesperson Stephen Conroy to advocate the dispatch of military forces.

Foreboding, disarray and even panic are evident within the Australian political establishment. The corporate elite is demanding savage austerity against a working class seething with frustration over social inequality and declining living standards. In the face of widespread anti-war sentiment within the population, the major parties are being pushed by Washington to risk a conflict with China, Australia’s largest trading partner and export market.

Under such conditions, anything is possible, including a fourth factional coup against a prime minister in six years or the collapse of the existing two-party system and a dramatic realignment within bourgeois politics.

The crucial issue is the building of the Socialist Equality Party, which alone fights for the political independence of the working class and the development of a socialist movement to combat war and austerity.

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