

# Australian coalition government faces defections

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With the Australian parliament due to resume tomorrow for its first sitting of 2017, question marks hang over the survival of the Turnbull government, which has been clinging to office by a threadbare one-seat majority since last July's election. The ruling Liberal-National Coalition is riven with divisions on foreign and domestic policy that have only been intensified by the advent of the Trump administration.

Media reports are speculating that the government, facing rapidly declining public support and possible splits by some of its most right-wing members, will not last the year. The commentaries generally focus on the plight of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as an individual, but more fundamental issues are coming to the surface.

The Trump administration's menacing threats of trade war and war with China have compounded the dilemma facing the Australia ruling elite: Washington will undoubtedly press Canberra to play a frontline role in any confrontation with Beijing, putting in jeopardy lucrative economic relations with China, Australia's largest trading partner. Trump's bullying phone call to Turnbull last week over a refugee deal is just a foretaste of what is to come.

Today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial noted: "Over the past decade, Australian foreign policy has become understandably obsessed with not being forced to choose between Chinese economic prosperity and American national security. The Trump presidency has brought the tensions into harsher relief, meaning the chances of Australia having to make difficult strategic trade-offs has increased uncomfortably."

Turnbull has attempted to put the best possible face on his dressing down by Trump. Last night, on the "60 Minutes" television program, Turnbull claimed that "this has been a very good week for Australia,"

because in response to Trump's phone call, "we have seen dozens and dozens of congressmen and senators talking about the importance of the Australian alliance.

Yet, all of these statements emphasised that Australia had been involved in every major US war since World War II and thus, by implication, would be required to do so again. Senator John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, stressed the "shared sacrifice in wartime," in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Vietnam.

On "60 Minutes" Turnbull also tried to dismiss Murdoch media reports that, supposedly in return for a refugee deal, the White House would expect Australia to send more special forces troops to Iraq and/or send warships or planes into the territorial zones around Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

Questioned by veteran journalist Laurie Oakes, Turnbull did not rule out sending Australian troops "for some Middle Eastern adventure" or "ships in the South China Sea." But he said any such requests would be no surprise, because "at the end of the day our two military establishments work very, very closely together, seamlessly, extremely closely together."

Thus, Trump's call appears to have achieved its immediate objective. Turnbull, who once expressed reservations about the US "pivot" to Asia to confront China, and whose government has not yet followed the US in provocatively challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, has been forced to state his government's readiness to accede to the demands of the White House.

Nevertheless, doubts remain in Washington about Turnbull and the public airing of the content of Trump's phone call has undoubtedly undermined his standing. His predecessor Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull deposed in September 2015, was a far more forthright

participant in US military aggression and clearly has not given up his ambitions to become prime minister again.

As well as creating enormous tensions in the Australian establishment, Trump's election has given succour to right-wing populists seeking to emulate him in demonising refugees and immigrants, and inciting protectionist sentiment, as a means of diverting rising discontent into reactionary nationalist directions.

Among them are Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation Party and Senator Cory Bernardi, whose "Australian Conservatives" grouping is threatening to split from the ruling Liberal-National Coalition. Both are being given extensive publicity in the corporate media. Bernardi is reportedly set to announce his break from the Coalition in the coming days.

The Murdoch media's Newspoll added to the pressure on Turnbull today, reporting that the Coalition's support plunged from 39 percent to 35 percent over the summer holidays, down to its lowest since Turnbull ousted Abbott. None of the anti-government swing went to Labor or the Greens. Instead, support for other parties jumped to 19 percent—up from 13 percent at the July election—including 8 percent for Hanson's One Nation.

Reporting the results on its front page this morning, the *Australian* noted with alarm that a record 29 percent of people would not give their first preference vote in a House of Representatives election to either the Coalition or Labor.

Turnbull has experienced what the Australian Broadcasting Corporation dubbed a "summer of discontent." As well as the phone call from Trump, the US president also dumped the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bloc, despite Canberra's pleas to the contrary. Turnbull has also had to deal with the forced resignation of Health Minister Sussan Ley, and constant sniping by Abbott, who is seeking to destabilise Turnbull's leadership. Turnbull also admitted he donated \$1.75 million of his own private fortune to the Liberal Party's election campaign last year—an indicator of flagging backing from corporate donors.

Behind the media conjecture about Turnbull's future stands a deepening economic and social, as well as geo-political, crisis. There is mounting frustration in the corporate elite that Turnbull has not delivered what he

promised them when he toppled Abbott. Turnbull, a multi-millionaire ex-banker, declared he would provide the economic leadership and "narrative" to ram through the austerity agenda that Abbott had failed to carry out.

The Coalition government already confronts intense popular opposition over the inroads it has made into health, education and other essential social services. But under conditions of a collapse of the mining boom and a slide towards recession, big business is demanding much more and is concluding that Turnbull may not be up for the task.

Turnbull's government, like Abbott's, is the latest in a line of unstable administrations—back to the last Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013—that have sought to impose the austerity agenda of big business on politically hostile population. Today's *Australian* editorial puts Turnbull on notice:

"For perhaps the tenth time in the past five or six years, as our politicians return to Canberra for the resumption of a parliamentary sitting period, there is a heavy burden of necessity on the government to reset and start afresh. Malcolm Turnbull, barely six months into his first term as the elected Prime Minister, seems to have lost his way, or is struggling to find it."

Meanwhile, the world situation has changed, accelerating this crisis. Trump's domestic program, on behalf of the billionaires he represents, of slashing corporate taxes, business regulation and health, education and welfare spending, must be matched. This means the Australian ruling elite requires a far deeper assault on the jobs, working conditions and social rights of the working class.



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