

Pro-Trump Australian senator splits from Coalition government

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7 February 2017

After months of speculation, right-wing and pro-Trump Senator Cory Bernardi formally split from the governing Liberal Party today and announced his intention to form a new party, the Australian Conservatives. At this stage, no member of the parliament's lower house, from either the Liberal Party or its coalition partner, the National Party, has joined him. The Coalition and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, therefore, still cling to power with a fragile one-seat majority.

Bernardi, 47, has represented the socially conservative Christian right of the Liberal Party since he first entered parliament in 2007. The main issues with which he has associated himself are climate change skepticism, draconian immigration policies, anti-Muslim xenophobia, anti-abortion campaigns, opposition to same sex marriage and calls for the repudiation of anti-discrimination legislation. He was a supporter of former prime minister Tony Abbott, who won the 2013 election against the Labor Party, and an opponent of Turnbull, who became prime minister through an inner-party coup against Abbott in September 2015.

A senator from the state of South Australia, Bernardi was seconded to Australia's United Nations delegation last year, spending three months in the US during the final stages of the presidential election campaign. He paid considerable attention to Donald Trump's campaign, particularly the latter's populist appeals to immense political alienation and discontent among some of the most desperate and impoverished sections of the American population and his channeling of such sentiments behind America First nationalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and right-wing economic populism.

Bernardi returned home vowing to develop a Trump-

style movement in Australia. On November 23, he wrote: “[P]olitics in Australia needs to change. My time in the USA has made me realise I have to be a part of that change, perhaps even in some way a catalyst for it.”

Bernardi is acutely conscious of the instability that surrounds the Turnbull government. He has split just days after the now notorious phone call between Turnbull and Trump, when they clashed over Turnbull's insistence that the new US administration honour a sordid refugee deal that had been earlier made with the Obama administration. In recent days, Turnbull has denied US reports that he agreed to certain quid pro quos with Trump to ensure the deal remained. The alleged “reciprocal” agreements ranged from sending more troops to Iraq to sending Australian warships into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea.

Points of difference had already flared after Trump repudiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership following his January 20 inauguration. Turnbull briefly suggested that the trade pact could continue without US involvement and raised, in meetings with Japanese prime minister Abe, the prospect of including China in a revised TPP—an action that would certainly have been viewed with hostility in Washington.

There is no question that the rifts between Turnbull and Trump have heightened tensions within Turnbull's government. In June 2010, under conditions of a rift between then prime minister Kevin Rudd and the Obama administration, pro-US factions within the Labor Party orchestrated an inner party coup to oust Rudd and install Julia Gillard.

According to Fairfax media, Bernardi reportedly told Turnbull this morning that a leadership challenge was being plotted against him and that “I want no part of

it.”

Given the extent of the factional divisions both within and between the Liberal and National parties, the outcome of any leadership spill would be highly unpredictable and could result in a split of some sorts and the fall of the Coalition government.

Bernardi’s statements today serve to underscore his major concern: to prepare for the collapse of the Coalition and Labor Party-dominated two party system that has prevailed in Australia since World War II.

In his resignation statement to the Senate, he declared: “[T]he body politic is failing the people of Australia and it’s clear we need to find a better way. The level of public disenchantment with the major parties, lack of confidence in our political process and concern about the direction of our nation is very strong. This is a direct product of the political class being out of touch with the hopes and aspirations of the Australian people.”

So-called third parties are now attracting an unprecedented 30 percent of the national vote. While Labor’s former working class base has abandoned the party in droves, right-wing populist formations such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, Nick Xenophon’s party and Jacqui Lambie’s party have cut deeply into the traditional voter base of both Liberal and National.

Bernardi has pointed to the fact that more than one million conservative voters have shifted from the Coalition to other right-wing formations. Comments he made last year, however, revealed that he is even more concerned over the prospect of mass anger and alienation taking the form of a left-wing, anti-capitalist movement within the working class and among young people. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* last December, Bernardi noted that if the Democrats had stood Bernie Sanders, rather than Hillary Clinton, Sanders would have beaten Trump in the election because his anti-capitalist rhetoric appealed to broad layers of the population. The South Australian senator recalled being shown “research that found 50 percent of young Americans believe socialism or communism is a preferable system to capitalism.”

In the period ahead, the danger of war with China will soar as a result of the Trump administration’s agenda, while the deepening economic crisis will intensify pressures on the government to slash taxes and cut public spending.

Bernardi’s objective is to divert the rapidly deepening social disaffection into anti-immigrant demagoguery and nationalism, combined with calls for corporate tax cuts, the winding back of social welfare and the slashing of government regulations on business.

According to Bernardi, 60,000 people have indicated “interest” on his “Australian Conservatives” web site. He has also developed relations with significant corporate figures, and is closely associated with Western Australian multi-billionaire Gina Rinehart, who has amassed a staggering fortune on the back of iron ore exports to China. Rinehart has heaped praise on Donald Trump, and called for Australian governments to replicate his pledges of massive corporate tax cuts and of winding back corporate regulation. According to several reports, Bernardi and Rinehart together met with members of Trump’s transition team in December.

Discussions are expected to take place, at some level, during the next several weeks between Bernardi and his backers, and Pauline Hanson’s One Nation.



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