

Rifts tearing Australian government apart

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Extraordinary conflicts have erupted within Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government, underscoring a profound political crisis that is engulfing not just the government but the entire parliamentary establishment.

An open confrontation is raging between Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his predecessor Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull ousted as Liberal Party leader in September 2015. Last Thursday, Abbott publicly criticised the government and warned it was “drifting to defeat.”

Abbott, who speaks for the conservative wing of the Liberal Party, made it plain that his concerns went far further, pointing to the widespread popular disaffection with both the traditional ruling parties, the Coalition and Labor. Abbott said nearly 40 percent of Australians did not vote for the Coalition or Labor in last July's election and declared: “It's easy to see why.”

Abbott issued a five-point manifesto of reactionary, nationalist policies that he declared the government must adopt to halt the reported surge of support for right-wing populists, such as Senator Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation.

The ex-prime minister's list consisted of cutting the renewable energy target, supposedly to lower electricity bills, reducing immigration, “to make housing more affordable,” scrapping the Human Rights Commission, stopping all new government spending and amending the Constitution to reduce the power of the Senate to block unpopular legislation.

Abbott's manifesto amounts to yet another attempt by him and his backers to meet the increasingly impatient demands of the financial elite for the gutting of social spending and the slashing of corporate taxes, while channelling the rising discontent already produced by the government's austerity offensive into reactionary and xenophobic directions.

Turnbull accused Abbott of sabotaging the government, blaming him for the latest slump in the government's opinion poll ratings. Turnbull said Abbott had delivered “an outburst on Thursday and it had its desired impact on

the Newspoll.” Monday's Newspoll, published by the Murdoch media, reported that the Coalition's vote had collapsed to 34 percent, from 45.6 percent at the July election. Labor's near-record low of 33.4 percent last July vote had risen marginally to 37 percent.

For now, some of Abbott's closest supporters, such as Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, have opposed his intervention, but they share his concerns. Yesterday, according to quickly leaked accounts of a Coalition party room meeting in Canberra, Turnbull aimed another rebuke at Abbott, warning his colleagues that “disunity is death.”

That message, however, was undercut within hours. Right-wing Liberal National Party (LNP) Queensland backbencher George Christensen quit as the National Party's whip in the House of Representatives—the party official tasked with enforcing its policies in parliamentary votes. He declared that his resignation would enable him to speak more freely against the government.

In recent weeks, Christensen has repeatedly threatened to defect from the government. This would not immediately bring down the government, which holds only a one-seat majority in the lower house—provided that Christensen supports the Coalition in any vote of no-confidence. But it could encourage other backbenchers to follow suit, further destabilising the government.

Christensen is also advocating a demerger of the LNP in Queensland, in order to re-establish the Nationals as a stand-alone rural-based party, a move that could unravel the Coalition nationally. Today, the *Australian Financial Review* reported “near unanimous agreement” among LNP parliamentarians from Queensland, including cabinet ministers, that the merger had created a vacuum for a third party with a regional focus.

A poll this week indicated that One Nation is attracting about 30 percent support in Christensen's northern Queensland electorate, putting it on a par with the LNP. Heavily-promoted by the corporate media, Hanson's polling numbers have doubled nationally in the past three months to 10 percent. The heaviest concentrations of her

support are in the most economically devastated areas, even though she advocates policies, including the slashing of welfare spending, which would hit hardest the voters she claims to represent.

Like Hanson, Christensen has a long record of demagoguery directed against Muslims. He espouses reactionary nationalist policies, such as cutting immigration, banning the burqa and reintroducing the death penalty. Amid soaring unemployment and social distress in his electorate, Christensen, echoing Hanson, has sought to marry this pitch with populist demands for protectionist measures, notably for the sugar industry, and an inquiry into the predatory practices of the major banks.

Highlighting the scramble by rival right-wing formations to exploit the mass political disaffection, Liberal Party defector Senator Cory Bernardi declared that Abbott would find a “warm welcoming embrace” in his recently-launched Australian Conservatives party.

“People are increasingly disillusioned with mainstream parties and are seeking alternatives,” Bernardi told Sky News. He returned from the US late last year, where he studied and hailed the election of Donald Trump, and invoked the necessity to develop a similar movement in Australia. Most significantly, Bernardi warned of a leftward turn by young people and workers, as shown by level of support for Democratic Party presidential contender Bernie Sanders, who had postured as an opponent of the “billionaire class.”

The social crisis in Christensen’s seat of Dawson provides an insight into the popular hostility that is wracking the major political parties. Extending along the Queensland coast between the regional cities of Mackay and Townsville, the electorate covers sugar cane farms, rural communities and workers who have been severely affected by global corporate restructuring and the mining slump.

Across the country, regional and working-class areas are being impoverished by the destruction of jobs, falling wage levels and soaring utility and housing costs. In Mackay and nearby Gladstone the number of jobless workers on poverty-line Newstart unemployment benefits has doubled since 2013 to 3,600. In Perth, the Western Australian capital, the suburbs of Rockingham, Kwinana and Wanneroo have experienced a combined jump of more than 7,000, a rise of up to 70 percent.

Even these figures camouflage the elimination of full-time jobs, forcing workers into lower-paid part-time work. According to recent data, the prevalence of part-time work has risen by 70 percent since 2000, more than

double the rate of increase in the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Areas targeted by One Nation are among the worst affected. For example, in the Lockyer Valley, west of Brisbane, mean annual taxable income has fallen by 6.5 percent since the 2008 financial crash, from \$41,432 to \$38,713.

Statistics released this week indicate an acceleration of social polarisation. Wages fell by 0.5 percent in the December quarter of 2016, while company profits surged by 20 percent, or \$13 billion. Last week’s ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to cut the Sunday and public holiday penalty wage rates for low-paid retail, hospitality and fast food workers will intensify the cutting of wages and the resulting discontent.

Like Bernardi, Paul Kelly, the *Australian’s* editor-at-large, today warned that the real political danger facing the ruling class was the rise of “left populism,” not “right populism.” Kelly said the “weakened” Turnbull government was about to be subjected to a campaign by Labor, the trade unions and the Greens decrying the penalty rates ruling as “proof of Turnbull’s alleged war against working men and women and families.”

In feigning opposition to the penalty rates cut, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten and all those promoting him are displaying breathtaking hypocrisy. Shorten, a key minister in the last Labor government, initiated the FWC’s review of penalty rates and pledged to abide by its decision.

Labor’s opportunist backflip is another indicator of the seething unrest that the political elite is seeking to divert. Far from any of the rival factions being genuinely opposed to the ongoing global economic and social “restructuring,” they have all helped impose its consequences onto the backs of the working class. Moreover, they are all well aware that this assault will deepen as the full implications of Trump’s aggressive “America First” program of trade war, militarism and elimination of social programs reverberate around the world.



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