

Infighting re-erupts in Australian government

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Less than a week after frantically cobbling together just enough votes to push a regressive school-funding bill through the Senate before a six-week winter recess, the Turnbull government's self-proclaimed "victory" has turned to dust.

The government claimed that last week's passage of the pro-private school "Gonski" bill proved it could push ahead with its agenda despite having only a one-seat majority in the House of Representatives and holding just 29 seats in the 76-member Senate. The events of the past week, however, underscore the instability of the government and the entire political establishment.

No sooner was the bill passed than renewed factional warfare broke out in the ruling Liberal Party between Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's supposed "moderate" wing and the more stridently right-wing conservative camp of Turnbull's ousted predecessor Tony Abbott.

The infighting was triggered by the leaking of a speech by Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne boasting to members of Turnbull's "left" faction that it was now the dominant force in the government. This was seized upon by conservatives, who demanded, and obtained, an apology from Pyne. Leading the pack was Abbott, who spent this week giving speeches and radio interviews making thinly-veiled criticisms of the government and issuing his own six-point manifesto to "Make Australia Work Again."

These are symptoms of a deeper political crisis, which has seen governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, fall in rapid succession since 2007, beset by mounting domestic and global pressures.

No government has been able to suppress the seething opposition in the working class to the austerity offensive demanded by the corporate elite to slash wages and working conditions and social spending, particularly on education, health and welfare. These social tensions will escalate from July 1, when electricity and gas prices will soar, adding hundreds of dollars to annual household bills under conditions of falling wages.

At the same time, there have been intensifying demands from Washington for an unconditional involvement in US military operations, especially those directed against China, Australian capitalism's largest export market.

Abbott himself was removed by his Liberal Party in September 2015 after it became clear that key measures in the government's 2014 budget would remain blocked in the Senate, whose Labor, Greens and crossbench members feared electoral suicide if they voted for them. Last July, Turnbull tried to break the deadlock by calling a double-dissolution election of both houses of parliament, but the result was disastrous, making the government's survival even more precarious.

Now the financial elite and its media mouthpieces are drawing the conclusion that Turnbull, who promised them he would produce an "economic narrative" to overcome the social and political disaffection, is no more capable than Abbott of delivering on his pledges.

These concerns were only aggravated by the deals that Turnbull struck with the right-wing populists in the Senate, including Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation, to scrape together the numbers for the school-funding bill. These deals included promising to spend \$5 billion more than originally intended over the next six years.

Yesterday's *Australian Financial Review* editorial provided a taste of the frustration in ruling circles. It fumed against the Gonski outcome and declared: "Turnbull's 'economic leadership' was as hollow from the start as Mr Abbott's. The day he snatched office he said the government needed a new economic narrative. He didn't have one."

Equally damning was a column by the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, entitled "Modern Liberals are rotten to their core beliefs." Ominously, he concluded: "Now, the Liberals' basic policy is to do whatever Labor was going to do, but a billion or two less, thereby claiming a faux fiscal responsibility. Politically, this tactic will ultimately be disastrous."

On top of that, the advent of the Trump presidency,

combined with the increasing assertiveness of the US military and intelligence apparatus, has made it ever-more difficult for Turnbull to stall on escalating Australia's frontline engagement in the Pentagon's war drive against China.

After taking office, Turnbull was at pains to champion the US alliance, dropping his previous calls for Washington to make some accommodations to China's economic rise. But he has not yet committed Australian forces to any confrontation with China, such as in the South China Sea, which would imperil the super-profits being made by Australian mining and other companies in China.

This position is becoming untenable. Two visiting US generals this week added their voices to the demands made by a parade of American political and "deep state" figures in recent weeks, including Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain and ex-CIA chief and general, David Petraeus.

Delivering a speech on Wednesday in Brisbane, US Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris insisted that Australia had to play a leading role, with other "partners" in the Asia Pacific region, in military operations ostensibly directed against Islamic State. These interventions, such as that underway in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao, are actually focused on undermining anyone, like Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who seeks support from China for economic reasons.

Harris, a fervent advocate of dispatching warships and planes to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea via so-called freedom of navigation exercises, also reiterated his calls for action to stop China establishing "de facto sovereignty" over the strategic waterway.

US Marine General David Berger, in Australia for this year's Talisman Sabre US-Australian military war games, went further, advocating the deployment of Australian "expeditionary forces" to Mindanao, where the Turnbull government last week sent surveillance planes to support operations by US Special Forces and the Philippine military.

Conducted in northern Australia, the Talisman Sabre exercises feature some 33,000 troops rehearsing aggressive military operations, including "Special Forces activities" and "amphibious landings." These are themselves preparations for confrontations with China.

It was in this context that Abbott this week ramped-up his agitation against the Turnbull government. Evidently,

he believes he could be called back into office when the government crumbles. According to the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, he told colleagues he would be there to pick up the pieces when "things go badly under Malcolm."

Abbott's hopes may appear delusional, given his current lack of support in the Liberal Party. But his six "Make Australia Work Again" slogans, seemingly channeling Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric, set out a right-wing authoritarian blueprint. Abbott's program features abolishing the powers of the Senate to block legislation, slashing public spending, cutting immigration, using the military for domestic repression and using the "shoot to kill" powers of the police to maintain order.

With an eye to Washington's agenda, Abbott this week added military policy to his campaign against the government. He suggested acquiring US nuclear-power submarines that would offer "even closer interoperability and integration with American forces," as well as meet the Trump administration's calls for military "burden sharing."

Abbott also conveyed his support for sending Australian forces into the 12-mile territorial zones around Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea. He noted that the Labor Party had been "stronger than the government on the assertion of freedom of navigation rights."

These machinations indicate that political turmoil lies ahead, as well as great dangers of war and repression. Thus far, however, the immense discontent in the working class has not translated into a conscious movement against the entire economic and political order.

That requires the development of a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class, against all the efforts of Labor, the Greens and the trade unions to corral the disaffection back behind the return of yet another pro-business and militarist Labor government.



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