

Australian parliament overshadowed by Korean war crisis and disqualification of MPs

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When Australia's parliament resumed this week after a two-week recess it was immediately preoccupied by two crises: Australia's likely involvement in any US-led war against North Korea and the continuing witch-hunt against MPs accused of being entitled to citizenship of a "foreign power."

The parliamentary proceedings point to the close connection between the two issues, by linking the danger of war to a reactionary drive to ensure that all members of parliament have undivided loyalty to the nation.

When question time began on Monday, Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten broke with parliamentary tradition. Instead of asking a question, he jumped to his feet to ask indulgence to make a statement on North Korea. He was permitted to do so after Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made his own announcement on the Korean crisis.

Turnbull told the House of Representatives that he convened a meeting that morning of the National Security Committee of Cabinet, which was briefed by the intelligence agency heads and military chiefs on North Korea's reported hydrogen bomb test.

The Liberal-National prime minister declared: "This is the most dangerous moment in time on the Korean Peninsula since the end of the Korean War. Much is at stake. The reckless and illegal conduct of this regime cannot be rewarded." Turnbull blamed the besieged North Korean regime and its primitive nuclear arsenal for the confrontation, rather than Washington, the world's greatest nuclear weapons power.

Moreover, Turnbull echoed the Trump administration in ratcheting up the pressure on China, insisting it had the "greatest responsibility" to use its "economic leverage to bring this rogue regime to its senses."

Last month, without the slightest public consultation,

Turnbull declared that Australia would join the US in any war against North Korea. "In terms of defence we are joined at the hip," he said. Turnbull invoked the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, saying it required the country to come to the "defence" of the US in any conflict.

Granted indulgence by the government, Shorten assured the government of complete bipartisan support. "I'd like to say to all Australians who may be watching or listening to these proceedings in parliament that whatever disagreements might colour the next hour or so, on this question, the parliament is of one mind," he said. Like Turnbull, he accused Pyongyang, not Washington, of provoking the crisis, declaring: "Labor unreservedly condemns North Korea's deliberate, dangerous and provocative nuclear testing."

The Labor Party then returned to the nationalist witch-hunt over dual citizenship by seeking to suspend standing orders to move a resolution that Turnbull immediately stand aside Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce. The motion called for Joyce to be removed from cabinet until the High Court rules on whether he can remain in parliament, after he admitted holding dual citizenship with New Zealand, via descent from his father, when he was first elected to parliament. The motion was narrowly lost by 74 votes to 73, with several "crossbench" MPs voting with Labor.

As soon as question time ended, Shorten asked for leave to make a personal explanation. He tabled a letter proving that he renounced his British dual citizenship before being entering parliament in 2007. Shorten, who had refused for several weeks to produce the document, said he needed to prove he was fit for office. "I accept that, if I want to be elected prime minister, there cannot be any doubt about my constitutional eligibility," he said.

In effect, Shorten set a precedent that shifted the

political burden of proof onto any MP accused of holding or being entitled to dual citizenship. For weeks, the Turnbull government and the entire parliamentary establishment have been convulsed by threats and counter-threats to refer MPs, possibly as many as 20, to the High Court for removal.

Already, Joyce and six other MPs, including two other National Party cabinet members, will appear before the court next month, facing potential disqualification under a reactionary, nationalist section of the 1901 Australian Constitution, leaving their political fate, and that of the government itself, in the balance for weeks.

On Monday, Regional Development Minister Fiona Nash and Senator Nick Xenophon, who heads his own four-member parliamentary team, became the sixth and seventh MPs to have their election referred to the High Court. Populist Senator Derryn Hinch and Labor Senator Katy Gallagher made statements to parliament declaring why they would not refer themselves to the court.

Section 44(1) states that any person who “is under any acknowledgment of allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power, or is a subject or a citizen or entitled to the rights or privileges of a subject or a citizen of a foreign power” is “incapable” of being elected to parliament. This potentially disqualifies up to half of Australia’s increasingly diverse population, because they are entitled to citizenship of another country, plus any citizen accused of “allegiance” to a “foreign power.”

After tabling his renunciation letter, Shorten reiterated Labor’s demand for Joyce’s removal. He asserted that if Joyce became acting prime minister, as scheduled when Turnbull leaves the country for a South Pacific forum on Friday, “the entire legitimacy of this government and this parliament is at risk.”

In part, this reflects concerns that every decision made by Joyce while remaining a minister—such as approving mining projects or awarding government contracts—could be challenged if the High Court disqualifies him, opening up a legal minefield.

The disqualification furore first emerged in mid-July, in still unclear circumstances. Two Greens senators immediately quit their seats once they were alleged to hold dual citizenship, simply because they were born in New Zealand and Canada respectively. Since then, the

affair has evolved into the greatest constitutional crisis since the Governor-General’s dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975.

However, there is mounting concern in ruling circles that the loyalty witch hunt, while intended to whip up jingoistic sentiment, is adding to the already widespread popular hostility toward the political establishment amid worsening living conditions, escalating inequality and deep anti-war feeling.

On Monday, the Senate voted down a motion from Senator Pauline Hanson, the leader of the xenophobic right-wing One Nation party, to conduct an audit of the eligibility of all MPs and senators. Labor and the government joined hands to defeat the motion, hoping to contain the crisis, at least for now.

Significantly, Hanson’s motion was supported by the Greens, who have been at the forefront of the nationalist agitation. Greens leader, Senator Richard Di Natale, was the first to call for such an inquisition in July. While anxious to be the purest protectors of the patriotism of MPs, the Greens are also offering to stabilise the parliamentary system by helping Labor form a minority government if the Liberal-National Coalition loses its majority.

Whatever the outcome of this constitutional crisis, the result has already been a further lurch to the right by the entire political establishment.



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