

Besieged Australian government postpones parliament

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In a desperate manoeuvre on Monday, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull abruptly cancelled next week's scheduled sitting of the House of Representatives, the lower house of the Australian parliament. He also unilaterally delayed, from December 1 to December 5, the deadline for all members of parliament to lodge documents proving they are not entitled to citizenship of any other country.

Whatever the immediate calculations of Turnbull, who is clinging to office by a thread, the postponement of the parliamentary sitting is the latest in a series of crises pointing to the unravelling of not just his ruling Liberal-National Coalition, but the parliamentary establishment as a whole.

A decade of instability since 2007, during which time no government has lasted a full parliamentary term, is being intensified by the mounting tensions produced by the Trump administration's aggression toward North Korea and China, and growing social inequality and political disaffection.

If Turnbull's edict stands, the lower house will not return from a five-week recess until December 4, even though the Senate, the parliamentary upper house, resumed last week. The prime minister's instruction to the House of Representatives Speaker to halt next week's session overturned a parliamentary timetable that was set at the start of the year.

These actions indicate that the Turnbull is no longer confident that the Coalition can control the numbers in the lower house, where the government is currently in a minority after two of its MPs were disqualified or resigned for being entitled to dual citizenship.

Eight MPs have been removed already this year following an October 27 ruling by the High Court. The judges applied a literal interpretation of the 1901 Constitution, insisting that MPs must have "single-minded loyalty to Australia," with no "foreign loyalties or

obligations," including even entitlement to dual citizenship in another country.

Today, the ninth MP fell victim to the nationalist and profoundly anti-democratic witch-hunt. Australian-born Nick Xenophon Team senator Skye Kakoschke Moore resigned on the basis that she is entitled to claim British citizenship because her mother was born in Singapore in 1957 before it was granted independence from Britain.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the leader of the rural-based National Party, and John Alexander, a Liberal backbencher, are presently contesting by-elections to seek to regain their seats. Even if the government wins the by-elections on December 2 and 16, it evidently fears that another slew of Coalition MPs could be disqualified once their citizenship papers are tabled, further undermining its survival.

The Coalition now has only 73 votes in the lower house, while Labor has 69 and could persuade crossbenchers, or dissident Coalition MPs, to back it on votes that endanger the government. Labor Party leader Bill Shorten yesterday secured support from four of the five crossbenchers to write a joint letter to Turnbull demanding that he bring back the lower house next Monday as scheduled.

The immediate trigger for Turnbull's move was apparently a threat by several government MPs to support a motion to force the government to conduct an inquiry into the country's rapacious banks. Such a defeat for the government on the floor of the lower house could be taken as a vote of no confidence, possibly precipitating the government's fall or a new general election.

However, the crisis goes far deeper. Since the landslide defeat of the Howard Coalition government in 2007, followed by the eruption of the global financial breakdown in 2008, successive Labor and Coalition governments have been unable to fully impose the austerity agenda demanded by the corporate ruling class. This is due to seething popular hostility to the ongoing

destruction of full-time jobs, living conditions and basic services.

Support for the two major parties has fallen to historic lows, with a variety of right-wing populists being the immediate beneficiaries. The present turmoil is another milestone in the breakdown of the two-party system that has prevailed since World War II.

The conflict over the banking inquiry is symptomatic of the broader divisions wracking the Coalition. This reportedly includes threats by its most right-wing MPs to break away and possibly join a Liberal Party defector, Senator Cory Bernardi, in seeking to create a Trump-style nationalist formation to divert social unrest.

In the latest manifestations of these rifts, an unnamed government MP has threatened to quit the Liberal Party unless Turnbull is removed as party leader. Ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull deposed in September 2015, last night publicly criticised Turnbull's postponement of the parliamentary session.

Various right-wing government members, including Treasurer Scott Morrison, are further stoking divisions in the Coalition. They are demanding that laws be enacted to legalise discrimination against same-sex couples, following last week's announcement that a postal survey produced a 61 percent national majority for legal recognition of same-sex unions (see: "After Yes vote for same-sex marriage, Australian government moves to entrench discrimination").

Turnbull attempted to justify delaying the parliamentary session by asserting that the extra week would enable the Senate to finalise proposed changes to the Marriage Act so it can be sent to the lower house. This was a transparent ploy, not least because 53 other bills are currently under debate in the House of Representatives. Turnbull said the lower house would then sit for a week, or possibly longer, before Christmas, but only to deal with the marriage bill and the disqualification of MPs over citizenship.

The prime minister's gambit has been lambasted in the corporate media. There is widespread dissatisfaction in ruling circles with Turnbull's failure to deliver on his promises to find a way to impose the sweeping budget cuts and other pro-business policies that his predecessor Abbott also proved unable to deliver.

"By attempting to shield his government from the complexity and acrimony of parliament, Malcolm Turnbull has only added to his political woes," yesterday's *Australian* editorial proclaimed." It declared that a "depleted government under siege is running

away."

Turnbull sought to divert from the crisis by telling a Business Council of Australia dinner on Monday night that he was working with Morrison to develop a package of income tax cuts to accompany promised company tax cuts. No details were provided, however, compounding the frustration within the corporate and media ruling elite.

Significantly, earlier on Monday, Turnbull declared his government's "strong support" for US President Donald Trump's aggressive decision to re-list North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism. Turnbull's immediate backing for Trump's latest escalation of the confrontation with North Korea marks yet another commitment to back a potentially catastrophic war that could draw in China and Russia.

When he was in opposition, Turnbull was a critic of unconditional Australian alignment with Washington. Since taking office, however, he has repeatedly pledged full support for US military actions. His alignment is shared by the Labor Party, with both parties anxious to retain Washington's backing. In 2010, the US embassy worked with key Labor Party leaders, including Shorten, to oust then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who had advocated trying to convince the US to accommodate itself to the economic rise of China.

The short-term outcome of the turmoil in Canberra is not yet clear. A defeat for the Liberal-National Party in this Saturday's state election in Queensland could hasten a move against Turnbull, the break-up of the Coalition or a split in the Liberal Party. What is certain is that the old parliamentary order is breaking apart. The political system is being refashioned along nationalist lines by the purge of MPs, at the behest of the High Court, who allegedly lack "sole loyalty" to Australia.

As the WSWS warned in its Perspective on November 17: "The stoking of patriotism is motivated by the fear of the ruling elite. It is a desperate attempt to cultivate a right-wing constituency that will defend the 'nation'—that is, the class interests of the capitalist oligarchs—from the inevitable eruption of struggle by the working class against the danger of war and social inequality."



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