Australian cabinet reshuffle highlights underlying political turmoil

Mike Head
21 December 2017

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday unveiled an end-of-the-year restructuring of his ministry, pointing to the increasing pressure on his Liberal-National Coalition government on both the geo-strategic and economic fronts.

Having barely survived the past 18 months, since being reduced to a one-seat parliamentary majority at the July 2016 double dissolution election, the government is desperately attempting to shore up its position.

The Coalition faces ongoing political uncertainty and the possibility of being forced into an early election during 2018. There is the continuing prospect of members of parliament, both government and opposition, being disqualified on the basis of a nationalist purge of MPs entitled to dual citizenship.

Turnbull has created three new super-ministries that point to the agenda of war preparations, social spending cuts and attacks on working conditions that the government intends to pursue.

Already deeply unpopular and facing potential electoral oblivion at the next federal election, the government is also seeking to fend off internal rifts. Turnbull enhanced the powers of the most right-wing, socially conservative members of the cabinet, underscoring his reliance on these layers.

Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton, who has spearheaded the government's anti-refugee policies, becomes Home Affairs Minister. In effect, he will be a "national security" supremo in charge of the country's main intelligence and immigration agencies. He will also supervise two more junior ministers overseeing the Australian Federal Police (AFP), "cyber security" and citizenship laws.

As well as the AFP, the new Home Affairs super-ministry covers the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Border Force, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre. Over the past decade and a half, these agencies have been handed greater resources and far-reaching powers of surveillance, compulsory questioning and detention.

Finance Minister Mathias Cormann has been handed extra authority as minister of state and leader of the government in the Senate. Together with Treasurer Scott Morrison, another key right-wing figure, Cormann will supervise the work of a team of ministers tasked with inflicting further budget cuts, particularly in welfare, health and education, where billions of dollars have already been slashed in successive budgets over the past decade.

Workplace Relations Minister Michaelia Cash takes charge of a new overarching "jobs and innovation" portfolio and gains a position on cabinet's expenditure review committee, commonly referred to as the "razor gang". Together with several junior ministers, Cash's brief is to step up the assault on full-time jobs, wages, penalty rates and other basic working conditions.

These three super-ministries are in addition to one other, covering the military, which was established last year after the government narrowly survived the 2016 election. Two senior ministers, Defence Minister Marise Payne and Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne, head a group of ministers focussed on a multi-billion dollar expansion of the armed forces.

To make way for Dutton's expanded powers, Attorney-General George Brandis, who was in charge of ASIO, has been handed the diplomatic post of high commissioner to Britain. The new attorney-general, with reduced powers, will be another social conservative, Christian Porter.

© World Socialist Web Site

A parallel shift occurred within the rural-based National Party, which retained five cabinet posts under its coalition agreement with Turnbull's Liberal Party. National Party leader, Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, dumped Infrastructure and Transport Minister Darren Chester and a junior minister, Keith Pitt, to allow two new members of parliament from the state of Queensland to be elevated straight into the cabinet.

Chester apparently earned the ire of social conservatives by supporting the recognition of same sex marriages, and by backing a fellow MP from the state of Victoria, Bridget McKenzie, to become deputy National Party leader.

The reshuffle has triggered rifts, with Pitt and others reportedly threatening to split away from the Joyce-led National Party. The threat could bust apart a formation that has been a linchpin of the Coalition and the two-party parliamentary system since the formation of the Country Party, the Nationals' forerunner, in 1920. An editorial in today's *Australian* denounced the dissidents, urging them not to "destabilise" the Coalition.

The same editorial backed Turnbull's ministerial restructuring, saying: "The most important feature of the reshuffle announced by Malcolm Turnbull is that it has elevated competent, conservative ministers into super portfolios where they will oversee the government's main agenda for next year: job creation, security and tax cuts."

"Job creation" means accelerating the corporate destruction of permanent jobs, forcing growing numbers of workers into poorly-paid, insecure casual or part-time employment, and further driving down average wage levels, which have already fallen in real terms for the past four years.

"Security" means ramping up the resources and powers of the intelligence, police and military apparatus, both for looming military conflicts and to deal with the heightened social and political unrest. It also means stepping up the use of nationalism and xenophobia, directed against refugees, immigrants and alleged "foreign influence," to divert social tensions outward.

"Tax cuts" means matching the Trump administration in providing historic tax breaks for the corporate elite in order to boost profits. This would mean going far beyond the $50 billion cut to company taxes over the next decade that the Coalition is already seeking to deliver to the financial markets.

This agenda underscores the intense pressure being placed on the Australian political establishment by US President Donald Trump's "America First" program.

In today's *Australian*, Treasurer Morrison declared that, unless matched by Australia, Trump's tax cuts would drain billions of dollars in investment from the country. Based on an International Monetary Fund report, Morrison said capital outflow from Australia caused by the US tax cuts, combined with lower rates in Germany and France, would reduce Australia's gross domestic product by 1 percent over the next decade.

At the same time, the escalating US military threats against North Korea, which are bound up with Washington's open drive toward a confrontation with China, have seen both the Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party commit themselves to backing the US in any conflict. Successive governments have aligned themselves ever-more behind the US alliance, despite China being Australia's largest export market.

The rising danger of war compounds the deepening social and class tensions wracking the government and the political establishment as a whole. Turnbull's reshuffle is a warning that its response will be to escalate the offensive against social and democratic rights of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site