

Public brawl erupts between Australian prime minister and his deputy

Mike Head
16 February 2018

In what has rapidly become an acute political crisis, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the leader of the Liberal Party, and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the leader of the rural-based National Party, have gone into what amounts to an all-out political war against each other.

Over the space of two weeks, a report that was first splashed in Murdoch tabloid newspapers about Joyce having an affair and expecting a baby with his former media advisor Vikki Campion has become a vehicle for seeking to oust Joyce and possibly the government itself.

While the corporate media is saturated with headlines about the “Joyce affair” and “sex bans,” the conflict clearly has deeper roots. It has brought to new intensity the underlying tensions wracking Turnbull’s fragile government and the Liberal-National Coalition itself.

Turnbull called a media conference last night to effectively make Joyce’s position untenable. He described Joyce’s conduct as “appalling” and a “shocking error of judgment.”

The prime minister sent Joyce on “personal leave” and urged him to consider resigning. Turnbull also declared an immediate ban on sexual relations between government ministers and staff members.

In parliament just 48 hours earlier, Turnbull had insisted that Joyce retained his confidence and would act as prime minister while he travelled to the US for discussions with the Trump administration. Yesterday, as his own role in shielding Joyce came under fire, he suddenly urged Joyce to take leave, allowing Senator Matthias Cormann, the Liberal Party’s Senate leader, to become acting prime minister.

National Party MPs, who had just decided to keep supporting Joyce, immediately warned Turnbull against trying to “blast out” Joyce, accusing the prime minister of meddling with their party’s leadership.

Today, Joyce called his own press conference to denounce Turnbull for causing “further harm” and “hurt” by “pulling the scab off” his affair. He branded Turnbull’s comments “inept” and “most definitely unnecessary.”

Joyce also accused Turnbull of improperly intervening in the National Party. “There is nothing that we dislike more

than implied intervention into the party processes of the National Party,” he said. “We are an independent political unit.”

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten then staged his own press conference to declare: “The PM and the deputy PM are now at war with each other.” In this “full-blown political crisis,” he called on Turnbull to either sack Joyce or be shown to lack “the courage to be prime minister of Australia.”

This afternoon, at yet another media conference, Turnbull sought to paper over the differences, denying any effort to criticise or “influence the National Party or its deliberations in any way at all.” He claimed the Coalition was “very strong,” despite his and Joyce’s criticisms of one another’s conduct, and refused to answer more questions.

In the meantime, former government minister Kevin Andrews also weighed in against the prime minister. He urged Turnbull to delay a trip to the US until the “circus” was resolved, “one way or the other.” Andrews is a prominent member of the conservative wing of the Liberal Party, which backs Turnbull’s ousted predecessor Tony Abbott and is politically closer to the National Party. This points to rifts intensifying in the Liberal Party, as well as with the Nationals.

Many unanswered questions remain about the origins and exact motives behind the unleashing of the allegations against Joyce. His affair with Campion was known throughout the media and political establishment for many months, including when Joyce was forced to quit his parliamentary seat last year and stand for re-election as part of the reactionary nationalist witch hunt over members of parliament having dual citizenships.

Scandals, usually involving salacious sex and/or personal corruption allegations, are invariably created to prosecute political and strategic agendas demanded by powerful ruling class interests, and to distract public attention from events of far greater significance.

For days on end, the headlines in the media have been dominated by the “Joyce affair,” and not the threats posed by the Trump administration’s preparations for wars against

North Korea and China. Today's headlines are all about "PM bans sex," not yesterday's declaration to a United States congressional hearing by incoming US ambassador Admiral Harry Harris that America must prepare for war against China, with Australia as a crucial US ally.

Joyce has long been regarded in ruling circles as a loose cannon, too erratic and tied to export-dependent mining and rural business interests to be counted on as reliable. These concerns have mounted as the Australian political establishment tightens its commitment to Washington, ratchets up military spending and whips up fears of "Chinese interference" in Australia, while pushing the corporate agenda of company tax cuts and the slashing of wages, conditions and social spending.

Joyce has no differences whatsoever with the US alliance. But he has cautioned against alienating the Chinese regime, reflecting the interests of sections of the Australian capitalist class, including mining magnates, whose fortunes depend heavily on iron ore, coal and other exports to China. Last month, Joyce declared it was "really important we understand that we are intricately linked to the commerce of the People's Republic of China" after his Turnbull ministerial colleague Concetta Fierravanti-Wells denounced Chinese aid projects in the Pacific.

This week, two mouthpieces of the financial elite stepped up their attacks on Joyce as a self-proclaimed "agrarian socialist" who has built his political career on pursuing the sectional interests of mining and rural businesses. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial urged Turnbull to find a way to remove Joyce, denouncing him as a "big-spending agrarian socialist" who had made a "populist attack on the big supermarkets" and whose inland rail project "is an economic pork barrel."

The *Australian's* contributing economics editor Judith Sloan produced a long list of Joyce's "appalling policy positions," including "re-regulation of the sugar industry in Queensland," shifting the pesticides-agricultural chemicals regulatory agency from Canberra to his electorate and remaining "silent about alleged theft of irrigated water" in the northern parts of the Murray-Darling Basin.

There is nothing progressive in the attacks on Joyce's personal relations or Turnbull's edict, via a ministerial code of conduct, banning consensual sexual relations in ministerial offices. Just last Friday, Turnbull dismissed a similar proposal that won support in the US, saying: "Adults can conduct their relationships, if it's consensual, respectful, that's their right."

Turnbull's about-face has been hailed by media commentators, such as Joanne Gray in the *Australian Financial Review*, as another victory for the fundamentally reactionary #MeToo campaign, which has destroyed the

careers of numerous artists and entertainers, often on the basis of unsupported or even anonymous accusations.

The sexual harassment witch hunt lumps together genuine crimes like rape and domestic violence with a much broader range of actions that should never become the subject of dismissals and public humiliation, including consensual sexual relations or even unwanted gestures of affection.

As the Joyce saga demonstrates, puritanical accusations of extra-marital affairs, of which there is no shortage in Canberra and other capitals, can set precedents that can be used to remove anyone considered an obstacle, or even unreliable.

In all the agitation against Joyce by the mass media and upper middle class feminists, joined by the Labor Party, there is not a skerrick of opposition to the underlying agenda of war preparations, austerity and overturning of basic democratic rights.

The Liberal-National Coalition and its pre-World War II predecessors, based on the divergent interests of different factions of the capitalist class, have historically proved too divided and unstable to impose the kind of deep-going attacks on working-class conditions that are required in times of economic breakdown and war.

The rupture that has erupted in the Coalition, which has a bare one-seat majority in parliament, could trigger the government's fall, fuelling a deep-going crisis of the political and corporate ruling class. There could be moves for the installation of another pro-business and pro-US Labor government. Labor, however, is also deeply unpopular, with its votes falling to historic lows in the last two federal elections.



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