

Australia's "Barnaby Joyce crisis": What is not being discussed

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Now into its third week, an unprecedented public conflict at the heart of Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government shows no sign of resolution, pointing to deeper tensions wracking the entire political establishment. While accusations against Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce continue to saturate media headlines, what the media is not addressing are the underlying issues engulfing the government and the parliamentary system.

Behind all the "Joyce affair" headlines, one must bear in mind that parliamentary scandals, usually involving old, rehashed sex or personal corruption allegations, are invariably drummed up in order to cover up—and divert public attention from—the real agendas being pursued.

The saga began when the Murdoch tabloids reported that Joyce had engaged in an affair with a female staff member, who is now pregnant with his child. This fact had been well known for months throughout the political and media establishment. It has since developed into a full-blown political crisis threatening the survival of both the Coalition and the government itself.

At present, far from backing down, Joyce, the leader of the rural-based National Party, is stridently defying calls by Turnbull, editorials in the financial press and elements of his own party to "consider his position"—that is, resign.

The level of tension tearing the government apart was on display in last week's open brawl between Turnbull and Joyce at two competing press conferences. Each featured recriminations and accusations against the other: Turnbull attacked Joyce's "appalling" moral failure, while Joyce responded by warning Turnbull away from his "inept" and "unnecessary" interference into the affairs of the National Party.

Despite being forced by Turnbull to take "personal leave" this week, during the prime minister's absence on an overseas trip, Joyce has issued numerous media interviews and press statements, declaring that he was

"not going anywhere" and intended to "fight" back. He bluntly denounced a call by the Nationals' Western Australian branch for him to quit, claiming that "people in the east in the National Party, have in the majority a different view."

Splits are now apparent in both Coalition parties. Various National Party cabinet ministers have backed Joyce. A meeting of the party's federal parliamentary caucus, scheduled for next Monday, where a motion to remove Joyce was mooted, appears unlikely to go ahead. Senior members of the Liberal Party's socially conservative wing, which is allied with the National Party, have also swung behind Joyce. These include former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the man Turnbull ousted in 2015. Last night Abbott warned against dumping Joyce, proclaiming him "a very strong and very well-known retail politician."

Aggravating the crisis is the publication this week of various reports that Turnbull himself was personally aware, months ago, of Joyce's affair and of the subsequent shifting of his staff member, now his personal partner, into two higher-paid jobs. Nevertheless, the prime minister had insisted, after Joyce won a by-election in his electorate last December, that the latter was his "mate" and "hero." That renders even more extraordinary Turnbull's across-the-board ban, last week, on sexual relations of any description, consensual or otherwise, between ministers and their staff in the Australian parliament, and his pretense of doing so on the basis of taking the high moral ground. More likely, he was following the advice of wife Lucy, who has embraced the abandonment of democratic rights that characterises #Metoo.

In the most immediate sense, the protracted stand-off points to the precarious character of Turnbull's government. Its dependence on the Nationals is amplified because the government holds only a one-seat majority in

parliament, a product of its catastrophic near-defeat in the July 2016 election. But more fundamental frictions are involved.

First and foremost, Washington is exerting ever-greater pressure on the entire ruling establishment for an accelerated, and more unconditional, alignment behind US preparations for potentially catastrophic wars against North Korea and ultimately China, Australia's largest export market.

The "Joyce affair" erupted on the eve of Turnbull's trip to Washington this week for an official state visit, where US President Donald Trump will reportedly press him to agree to a formal "Quadrilateral" security and economic alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia, directed against China. Trump and US intelligence agencies will also demand a heightened offensive against alleged "Chinese interference" in Australia and Asia, a witch hunt that has already seen the Turnbull government introduce a barrage of "foreign interference" bills.

Moreover, earlier this month, the Trump administration announced the appointment of Admiral Harry Harris as the next US ambassador to Australia. Harris is one of the most outspoken advocates for confronting Beijing and preparing war against China. His role will be to silence any and all critics of this agenda within the ruling elite, and to ensure that popular opposition to war, which will invariably erupt among workers and youth, be forcefully suppressed.

While Joyce and the Nationals fully subscribe to the US alliance, they are regarded as somewhat unreliable because of the heavy dependence of some of their key constituencies, particularly the mining industry, on Chinese markets. Just last month, Joyce distanced himself from the government's attack on Chinese aid projects in the Pacific, declaring that it was "really important we understand that we are intricately linked to the commerce of the People's Republic of China."

At the same time, there is mounting frustration within the corporate and financial elites with the Turnbull government's failure to impose its full agenda, including multi-billion-dollar company tax cuts and even more severe cuts to social spending. These concerns have grown, amid a welter of warning signs about the highly unstable and vulnerable state of the Australian economy, marked by an immense property bubble and the highest level of household debt in the world.

Within ruling circles, Joyce and the Nationals have long been regarded as obstacles, due to their substantial reliance, for vote-gathering purposes, on economically

devastated rural and regional areas. There, they compete with right-wing populists, such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation, to channel mounting discontent into reactionary nationalist and protectionist directions. Joyce, touted contemptuously by Abbott and others as a "retail politician," is personally identified with the populist wing of the Nationals and credited with saving the government by wresting an extra parliamentary seat away from One Nation in the 2016 federal elections.

These concerns rose late last year. After 18 months of opposing calls by Joyce's National Party for a royal commission into the predatory practices of Australia's banks and other financial institutions, which have ruined many smaller farmers and businesses, Turnbull's government was forced to announce such an inquiry. Some National Party MPs had threatened to cross the floor of the parliament if it did not, threatening the government's survival.

The Nationals' capacity to wring such back-flips and concessions from the government increased in 2015, when Joyce insisted on a new coalition agreement with the Liberal Party, after Turnbull had ousted Abbott. That pact, still secret, is known to include key cabinet posts for Joyce and other Nationals. After the near-loss in the 2016 election, Joyce forced Turnbull to increase the Nationals' posts in the inner cabinet from four to five.

Above all, the turmoil in Canberra is a measure of intensifying hostility towards the entire parliamentary establishment throughout the population, especially in working-class areas, over unprecedented levels of social inequality and the danger of war. While the government is pouring billions into military spending, health, education, disability and other essential public services are being driven into the ground and/or privatised, as wages and working conditions are slashed.

There is a large element of media- and politician-driven distraction from these pressing issues in the "Joyce affair." More fundamentally, however, it reveals the crisis-ridden nature of the ruling establishment, as it comes under mounting pressure from Washington and faces, with rising fears, deepening social discontent.



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