

Australian deputy prime minister ousted via untested sexual harassment allegation

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Australian Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the leader of the rural-based National Party, was forced to resign yesterday, just hours after Murdoch tabloids ran sensational headlines about an untested “complaint” of sexual harassment by a Western Australian agricultural industry spokeswoman.

Joyce is a reactionary right-wing populist. But the anti-democratic method—now the *modus operandi* of the #MeToo “sexual misconduct” witch hunt—used by the media and political establishment to politically assassinate him, points to underlying calculations that have nothing to do with personal morality. It demonstrates, once again, how unsubstantiated accusations can be deployed against anyone, in pursuit of a political agenda.

The unprecedented removal of such a pivotal figure in the Liberal-National Coalition government also throws into further doubt the future of the already fragile and deeply unpopular government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Over the last eighteen months, Joyce has played a key role in shoring up the government’s rural and regional base, amid rising social and economic discontent.

During the past decade, not a single Australian federal government has lasted a full three-year term. The ousting of Joyce is yet another symptom of the degeneration and decay of bourgeois parliamentary rule, and of the century-old Coalition itself.

Until Thursday, Joyce had continued to insist that he would not quit, despite the relentless publicity surrounding his relationship with a former staff member, who is now expecting his child. Then, suddenly, he called a media conference yesterday to quit his political posts. The Western Australian complaint, he declared, was “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Liberal Party Senate leader Matthias Cormann, who is acting prime minister this week, while Turnbull visits Washington, immediately welcomed Joyce’s departure. The harassment complaint had added “a whole new

dimension,” he said, to the controversies surrounding Joyce.

It then emerged that the woman who had made the allegation, now identified as Catherine Marriott, was furious that it had been made public. Her intention, she insisted, had been to make a complaint to the National Party’s national executive, in the hope that it would be dealt with internally. Making the complaint public was “the last thing my client wanted,” her lawyer told the media.

However, the National Party establishment, led by party president Larry Anthony, a former Howard government minister, had relayed news of the “serious” complaint to the Murdoch newspapers. These publications have led the campaign against Joyce since February 7, when they published front-page photos of his pregnant partner.

In announcing his decision to resign from the leadership, while remaining in parliament, Joyce sent a barbed message to Turnbull. He noted that the government, which is clinging to office with a one-seat majority, would not have survived the mid-2016 election if the Nationals, under his leadership, had not picked up an extra seat.

One of Joyce’s supporters, National Party Senator Matt Canavan, acidly lamented his departure, saying Joyce had “helped pull the Nationals back from the grave.” This was a reference to Joyce’s role in “saving” the Nationals from decimation, at the hands of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, which exploits rural and regional poverty to peddle a racist and protectionist platform.

Joyce was installed as National Party leader in February 2016, on the back of his reputation as a rebel, prepared to cross the parliamentary floor against the Liberals to stand up for rural interests. In his resignation media conference, he claimed to have fought for the people in “weatherboard and iron”—a metaphor for poor Australian rural towns. He retains a degree of popularity in “the bush,” and his

ousting by the party's National Executive, despite the ongoing support from his parliamentary colleagues, will likely set the stage for conflict between the party's membership base and its national leadership.

The financial elite views Joyce's populist wing of the National Party as central to the government's failure to impose its full agenda, including massive corporate tax cuts and further severe cuts to social spending. In recent weeks, big business commentators have reignited complaints that Joyce remains a self-styled "agrarian socialist," committed to featherbedding rural and regional electorates.

Joyce forced the government to agree to build, for example, a \$10 billion inland rail route from Brisbane to Melbourne, derided by the financial media as a white elephant. Moreover, his fellow Nationals threatened to vote against the government, unless it convened a royal commission into the rapacious activities of the big banks.

While Joyce has a substantial political profile, those National Party politicians lining up to replace him, including junior minister Michael McCormack—the apparent frontrunner—are virtually unknown outside their individual rural electorates.

His departure will deepen the fissures wracking both the Nationals and the Liberals. Turnbull's government not only has the smallest possible parliamentary majority, an expression of the hostility and contempt in which it is now held by millions of ordinary people. His Liberal Party is also riven by a conflict with its social conservative wing, led by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who has never accepted his dislodgement at Turnbull's hands.

Moreover, Washington is placing ever greater pressure on the government to increase its already multi-billion-dollar commitment to preparations for catastrophic wars against North Korea and, ultimately, China, Australia's largest export market.

In the course of Turnbull's current visit to the White House, he has been publicly urged to organise provocative "freedom of navigation" military exercises, directed against China in the South China Sea, and to join a Quadrilateral anti-China alliance with the US, Japan and India.

On February 9, Trump announced the appointment of Admiral Harry Harris as the next US ambassador to Australia. Harris, about to retire as commander of the US Pacific Command, is one of the most hawkish and ruthless advocates for war against China. His assignment will be to quash any reservations about, or opposition to,

this agenda—in parliament, or from millions of ordinary workers and youth—by whatever means necessary.

While Joyce and the Nationals support the US military and strategic alliance, they are regarded as unreliable in relation to a war on China. Their key constituency consists of mining and agricultural companies that depend heavily on Chinese markets.

The acrimony between Joyce and Turnbull is intense, after Turnbull last week publicly castigated the Nationals leader and urged him to quit. In response, Joyce failed to inform Turnbull of his resignation.

In his own media statement, Turnbull praised Joyce for departing, while optimistically claiming, "The Coalition between the Liberals and the Nationals is Australia's most successful political partnership, having endured for more than 95 years."

Somewhat more realistically, Paul Kelly, the *Australian's* veteran editor-at-large, declared today: "The Joyce crisis has probably killed off Turnbull's recovery hopes." The Murdoch flagship's editorial warned: "[I]t is self-evident the government needs Barnaby's regional battlers to survive. His successor will face a daunting task to till that fertile ground."

Accordingly, the *Australian* and the other main financial newspaper, the *Australian Financial Review*, have begun highlighting the opposition Labor Party's preparations to return to office, on the basis of a thoroughly pro-business program. Both publications ran lengthy feature interviews with Labor's shadow treasurer Chris Bowen, promoting his vows to revive the Hawke-Keating Labor governments' "reform" agenda, responsible for "restructuring" Australian capitalism, at the direct expense of the working class, from 1983 to 1996.

This must sound a warning: as Turnbull's government implodes, plans are already afoot to bring to power a Labor government, headed by Bill Shorten, which will be the most right-wing ever, including in its fulsome support for the US alliance and its war agenda.



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