

Australian government instability intensifies after deputy prime minister's removal

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The rifts tearing apart both coalition partners in the Liberal-National Coalition government are set to worsen following last Friday's forced resignation of Barnaby Joyce as deputy prime minister and National Party leader.

It is now clear that Joyce was not removed because of an untested complaint of sexual harassment, as Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, his key ministers and the corporate media have all claimed. Rather the government and the mass media manipulated and seized upon that allegation to politically execute Joyce. It was a calculated #MeToo-style operation of unsubstantiated accusations of sexual misconduct.

None of the sordid details now emerging about the high-level plotting to knife Joyce can be understood outside the broader political context.

As underlined by Turnbull's trip to Washington, where the prime minister escalated the government's commitment to US war preparations, the real reasons for Joyce's ouster lie in the immense tensions wracking the government, driven by both geo-strategic and domestic crises.

There is the growing danger of trade war, and ultimately war, between the US and China, which would have massive consequences for the Australian capitalist class. This is being compounded by the financial elite's mounting discontent with the Coalition government's failure to carry through the full corporate agenda of sweeping cuts to company taxes and social spending.

The bitterly divided vote by National Party members of parliament to replace Joyce by a virtually unknown junior minister, Michael McCormack, highlights the fact that these stresses are not just engulfing Turnbull's government. The Liberal-National Coalition itself, a vital mechanism of capitalist rule, is coming apart, underscoring the fragility of the deeply unpopular parliamentary elite as a whole.

The National Party is split down the middle. Reportedly,

McCormack was within one vote in the 21-member party caucus of being defeated by a staunch Joyce supporter, David Littleproud, whom Joyce had elevated into Turnbull's inner cabinet last year. Despite public calls by the party's deputy leader Bridget McKenzie for the ballot to be uncontested, Littleproud only pulled after it became evident that McCormack had the numbers.

Nevertheless, right-wing populist George Christensen, who openly called last weekend for the Nationals to withdraw from the Coalition, stood as a protest candidate against McCormack. In an effort to maintain the image of a united front, the National Party refused to divulge the final vote count. But on Facebook Christensen had declared he would rather see "a full cabinet of Liberal ministers than have to compromise our values and the welfare of the good people we represent."

Christensen threatened to cross the parliamentary floor last year, in order to force the government to call a royal commission into the predatory practices of the major banks and finance houses. Like Joyce, Christensen has long been alarmed by the danger of the National Party losing its base among impoverished rural residents, especially in his home state of Queensland, to the nationalist, anti-immigrant and protectionist Pauline Hanson's One Nation party.

Inflaming these fissures is the fact that Turnbull and the political establishment, including the big business wing of the National Party, were determined to depose Joyce by any means whatsoever. Yesterday, Turnbull revealed in parliament that last Wednesday, just after he landed in the US, he ordered an investigation by his department head into Joyce's supposed breach of a ministerial code of conduct by having an affair with his media advisor, Vicky Campion, who is now Joyce's partner, expecting his child. That investigation was dropped once Joyce quit.

Moreover, to ensure his political demise, the prime minister also made public an inquiry being conducted into

Joyce's official travel expenses claims during the period in which he was often travelling with Campion.

Today, Fairfax Media's Mark Kenny reported that National Party president Larry Anthony, a former cabinet minister and scion of the party's corporate establishment, asked a woman who made the harassment complaint against Joyce to put her accusation in writing. Anthony then flew across the country, from Western Australia to Joyce's home in Armidale, northwest of Sydney, accompanied by a lawyer, to warn Joyce that the complaint was about to become known publicly. In effect, Anthony delivered an ultimatum to Joyce: quit or be disgraced.

National Party supporters of Joyce are doubly furious because the woman who made the original complaint to the National Party, Catherine Marriott, has stated that she never intended it to be made public. At least one Nationals' member of parliament, Andrew Broad, has accused an unnamed Liberal MP of being involved in leaking Marriott's name to the media.

Kenny reported: "The sexual harassment complaint that triggered the downfall of Barnaby Joyce continues to stoke division inside the Nationals, with some senior party figures believing the allegations were weaponised to blast the former deputy prime minister from cabinet."

Today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial identified some of the underlying political issues behind Joyce's ouster. Under the headline, "McCormack must herds Nats out of the populist paddock," it demanded that he steer the Nationals out of the "populist sideroad" that forced the government's hand on the banking royal commission.

The editorial insisted that McCormack must "restore some discipline and order" to the government, so it could prosecute its "modestly ambitious plan" to cut the company tax rate from 30 to 25 percent, and "stop wastefully spending so much taxpayer money." The newspaper insinuated that this year's federal budget in May, "just 12 weeks away" could be the government's last chance to prove itself.

Interviewed by the same publication, McCormack vowed to deliver on the required agenda. "I'm not Barnaby Joyce," he stated. He said the Nationals "realise that we still are in a fiscal position that requires restraint and responsibility, and we will maintain that economic responsibility."

As McCormack indicated, his main attraction, as far as the ruling class is concerned, is that he is not Joyce. Otherwise, he is, as the editorial put it politely, "little

known." A former regional newspaper editor, his record since entering parliament in 2010 has been lacklustre. He has been a parliamentary secretary, assistant minister or junior minister, shifted from one portfolio to another, without ever being elevated into cabinet. Twice he stood unsuccessfully for the National Party deputy leadership, indicating that he has no base of support.

McCormack said he would discuss with Turnbull renegotiating the still-secret Coalition agreement that Turnbull had to sign in 2015, when he ousted his Liberal Party predecessor Tony Abbott. That pact reportedly gave key concessions to the Nationals, who were opposed to Turnbull's takeover, including control of major cabinet portfolios such as infrastructure and water supply.

Now Joyce has joined Abbott on the parliamentary backbench, from where Abbott increasingly has been openly criticising Turnbull. Abbott's socially conservative faction of the Liberal Party is aligned with Joyce's populist wing of the National Party, ensuring further instability.

One crucial issue is not being mentioned in the media, despite Joyce being removed on the eve of Turnbull's warm political embrace of President Donald Trump in Washington.

Joyce is fully committed to the US alliance. However, in addition to his populism, he was regarded in ruling circles, and no doubt in Washington, as unacceptably susceptible to pressure from the National Party's backers in the mining and agricultural export industries that depend heavily on Chinese markets that would be jeopardised in the event of trade war and war.



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