

Australian government near collapse as Liberal Party lurches to the extreme right

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The real victor of yesterday's ballot to decide who holds the leadership of the governing Liberal Party, and therefore sits as prime minister of Australia, is former Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton—the candidate who lost.

Dutton, representing the most right-wing faction of the Liberal Party, won 35 votes from his parliamentary colleagues, just seven short of defeating Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who received 48 votes. Turnbull's position has been irreparably undermined. At least 10 of his ministers, including Dutton, have tendered him their resignations, in a blatant demonstration of no-confidence.

Dutton, with the gloating support of former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who Turnbull ousted in a leadership coup in September 2015, is confidently preparing for the next opportunity to seize the leadership. Under some circumstances, such as Turnbull's resignation, it could take place before the end of the week.

Every political party and the establishment media are aware that the campaign for the next Australian election, which must be called by May 2019 at the latest, has effectively begun. If the Coalition loses its threadbare one-seat majority, the election could be formally called within days.

In a clear indication of the plotting underway for a second challenge, the governor-general, who must formally swear in a new prime minister, has cancelled a trip away from Canberra, stating that it was "prudent" that he should remain in the national capital.

The political lurch to the right by the Liberal Party is indicated by the political record of the nationalist and militarist cabal behind Dutton's bid for leadership.

Whether under Dutton or a so-called "compromise" candidate, Liberal policies will consist of blaming immigrants for the social crisis afflicting millions of people and inane demagoguery against the "inner-city elite" supposedly represented by the opposition Labor and

Green parties. It will include the rejection of any measures to reduce carbon emissions and vows that constructing new coal-fired power plants will lead to lower energy prices. On foreign policy, it will consist of blanket commitment to the military alliance with the United States and stepped-up xenophobia against purported Chinese "interference" in Australian politics and society.

The objective of such a campaign would be to try and win back to the Coalition the large number of Liberal and National Party supporters who have switched over the past decade to supporting a variety of right-wing populist "minor" parties, such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation.

The Liberal Party, along with sections of the rural-based National Party that is also part of the Coalition government, is in the process of being refashioned into a Trump-style movement. One of the ministers who tendered their resignation, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, denounced Turnbull yesterday, asserting that "our conservative base"—that is, a small but vocal right-wing constituency—"strongly feel that their voice has been eroded."

It is no mere coincidence that the Dutton-Abbott wing moved to bring down Turnbull just days after a newly-installed Katter Australia member of parliament, Fraser Anning, made a nationalist rant on the floor of the Senate demanding a total ban on Muslim immigration. Anning, summing up the fascistic tendencies coming to the fore, declared that the "final solution" would be a referendum to reinstate Australia's past racist "White Australia" immigrant policy.

The realignment in Australia is entirely in line with global developments. It is the political reflection of the intractable economic crisis of world capitalism since 2008. In country after country, support for traditional parties of the parliamentary establishment has disintegrated due to their imposition of endless austerity

and hardship on the working class for the benefit of a tiny financial and corporate oligarchy.

Internationally, the representatives of the ruling elite are preparing to try and suppress the inevitable eruption of mass struggles by the working class against the failure of the capitalist system. Sweeping anti-democratic laws have been introduced and vast resources poured into increasing the size and powers of police forces and intelligence agencies. Under conditions in which sympathy for left-wing and socialist positions is growing, desperate efforts are being made to censor and silence oppositional views and discussion from the internet.

At the same time, factions of the capitalist class are consciously cultivating extreme right-wing, fascistic tendencies to try to undermine, and use against, the development of an internationalist and socialist movement in the working class.

In broad terms, the Dutton-Abbott cabal in Australia is paralleled by the “alt-right” constituency in the US personified by figures like Steve Bannon; the National Front in France of Marine Le Pen; the United Kingdom Independence Party and anti-EU faction of the British Conservative (Tory) Party around Boris Johnson; the fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD); and the range of fascistic movements in other so-called parliamentary democracies.

The ability of these extreme right tendencies to gain a hearing has been directly facilitated by the pro-capitalist parties once falsely described as the “left.”

The Labor Party in Australia, the Democratic Party in the US, Labour in Britain, the Socialist Party in France, the Social Democratic Party in Germany: all have been at the forefront of the decades-long assault on the social rights and living standards of the working class, as well as presiding over militarism and the undermining of democratic rights.

The right-wing lurch in the Liberal Party is taking place under conditions in which the Coalition is facing defeat at the upcoming election. After nearly five years in office, presiding over the decline of working-class living standards and the enrichment of the wealthy, it is viewed with widespread hostility. Dutton and Abbott are among the most unpopular politicians in the country. Dutton is reviled by millions due to his ruthless persecution, as home affairs minister, of refugees.

The next government will most likely be formed by Labor in a loose coalition with the Greens and other minor pro-capitalist parties. It will have to respond to steadily worsening global and domestic economic

conditions and rising tensions between the US, Australia’s strategic ally, and China, the country’s largest trading partner.

Already, Australia has suffered a fall in its currency and is facing immense pressure to increase in interest rates, which could trigger a meltdown in a highly speculative housing market and crisis in the banking system. An incoming government will also face intense demands by the Reserve Bank and global credit agencies to savagely cut public spending to reduce the budget deficit and mounting state debt.

The Australian ruling class has the measure of the Labor Party. It knows Labor, with the backing of the trade unions, will ruthlessly impose the dictates of finance capital and the major corporations against the working class. The dominant factions of Labor are no less fully committed to upholding the strategic alignment with the US against China, regardless of the economic consequences and the immense danger it is leading toward war.

Like extreme right-wing formations internationally, Dutton and Abbott represent preparations for immense class conflict and political upheaval. As the official parliamentary opposition, they would employ populist demagogy to attempt to channel discontent in reactionary, nationalist directions while behind-the-scenes the ruling class conspires to dispense with the façade of democracy altogether.

The critical and urgent task is the development of an independent political movement of the working class against all the establishment parties. Workers must be united around a socialist and program against the capitalist system and the social inequality and war dangers it produces. The fight for such a movement will be at the centre of the election campaign conducted by the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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