

Australian prime minister faces ouster by extreme-right faction

Mike Head
23 August 2018

For the fourth time in just eight years, an elected Australian prime minister appears likely to be removed by a political coup inside the ruling party before finishing a single term in office. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's likely ouster tomorrow by the most right-wing faction in the Liberal Party underscores the instability wracking the entire parliamentary order.

After hours of parliamentary chaos today, Turnbull announced at 1:00 p.m. that if he received a petition from a majority of Liberal Party members of parliament he would call a party room ballot at midday on Friday, resign as leader and quit parliament at an ensuing national election. Both the right-wing ex-Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Treasurer Scott Morrison, representing Turnbull's "moderate" faction, have declared their intention to stand for the party leadership.

In a last-ditch bid to block Dutton, Turnbull said he expected to receive advice from the attorney-general tomorrow morning about Dutton's eligibility to sit in parliament. An alleged financial interest in federal government-subsidised childcare centres could disqualify Dutton under section 44 of the Constitution.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the turmoil, the schism tearing apart the ruling Liberal-National Coalition will worsen. The Liberal Party, a mainstay of capitalist rule since World War II, along with the Labor Party, is breaking apart in the face of the tensions produced by the explosive growth of social inequality over the past four decades, declining working-class living standards and the immense pressures produced by the intensifying conflict between the US and China.

Dutton is seeking to refashion the party, and realign the political order, on the basis of anti-immigrant scare-mongering, "law and order" repression and anti-China nationalism and militarism, as a means of diverting mounting popular discontent and political disaffection along nationalist and xenophobic lines.

The moves underway to install Dutton as prime minister are not driven by any calculations that he would improve the

chances of the Coalition retaining office in the next election, which must be called by May. Although Turnbull's increasingly unpopular and discredited government is headed for a catastrophic defeat, Dutton is loathed by broad layers of people. That is due to his ruthless persecution, as home affairs minister, of refugees, his previous push, as health minister, to slash medical funding and his demonisation of African immigrants, whom he has accused of forming "gangs" that are terrorising the population of Melbourne.

In media comments, Dutton has mapped out a far-right agenda, along the lines of Trump in the US and similar tendencies in Europe, such as the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France; the United Kingdom Independence Party and the fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD). He has called for the slashing of immigration—blaming migrants for the lack of infrastructure—more draconian policing measures and a more confrontational line against China.

Key lieutenants in his leadership bid include prominent ex-military figures, such as Senator Jim Molan, an ex-general who once headed the US-led operations in Iraq, and Andrew Hastie, a former Special Air Services (SAS) commander in Afghanistan who now heads parliament's security and intelligence committee.

Both Molan and Hastie are closely associated with the US military and intelligence agencies. They have been on the frontline of demands for greater military spending and measures directed against China, including the recently passed "foreign interference" legislation. Their support for Dutton indicates Washington's blessing for Turnbull's ouster.

Also notable in Dutton's camp are ministers in charge of the security, police and intelligence apparatus, such as Justice Minister Michael Keenan and Law Enforcement and Cyber Security Minister Angus Taylor. Dutton himself was elevated by Turnbull last year to take a new home affairs "super-ministry," placing him in charge of the federal police, the Australian Border Force and the immigration department.

A bitter split has opened up between the big business “moderate” wing of the party, personified by Turnbull, a former merchant banker, and the “conservative” faction that is seeking to claw back support from layers of the population who have turned to right-wing populists like Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant One Nation.

If Dutton takes office, ousted figures such as Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop may quit parliament, potentially forcing an early election. At least three National Party MPs have reportedly threatened to resign from the Coalition, depriving the government of its one-seat majority.

Turnbull survived an initial Liberal Party room challenge by Dutton on Tuesday, securing 48 votes to 35, but was further destabilised by ministerial resignations. This morning, three key cabinet ministers—Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, Jobs Minister Michaelia Cash and Communications Minister Mitch Fifield—demanded that Turnbull resign or call another party room ballot.

Parliament was then thrown into turmoil as the government pushed through a motion to adjourn the House of Representatives early, cancelling the daily question time.

Another fatal blow to Turnbull was yesterday’s final vote in the Senate to reject his central economic policy—Trump-style multi-billion dollar tax cuts for the largest large companies operating in Australia. Pauline Hanson balked at voting for the bill despite a last-minute offer by the government to exclude the country’s loathed four big banks from the handout.

That defeat followed Turnbull’s abandonment of his other signature policy, a so-called National Energy Guarantee to attract investment in electricity generation. Dutton’s coal industry-backed supporters, led by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, threatened to cross the floor of parliament and defeat that bill because it retained a vague commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 26 percent by 2030.

Significantly, Turnbull’s allegedly inadequate commitment to the intensifying confrontation by Washington against China—first under Obama and now Trump—was cited by Dutton supporters as a reason for moving against him.

After aligning himself unconditionally behind Washington’s war preparations against China since taking office in September 2015, Turnbull this month gave a speech hailing the country’s “very deep” relationship with China, Australian capitalism’s largest export market.

Former Turnbull minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells declared yesterday that a Dutton government would block any bid by China’s Huawei to tender to contracts to build Australia’s 5G network and reject an application by Hong Kong’s CK Infrastructure Holdings to buy a large section of the country’s gas pipelines.

“There is a view that our position on China needs to be a lot clearer, a lot crisper and lot more definitive,” she said. In January, as minister for international development, Fierravanti-Wells accused China of financing “roads to nowhere” in the Pacific, driving small island countries into unsustainable debt and “duchessing” regional leaders.

For months, leading figures in Washington, and Australia’s US-connected intelligence and security chiefs, have insisted that the government must ban any involvement by Huawei, one of the world’s biggest telecommunications equipment suppliers, just as the last Labor government barred Huawei’s participation in the country’s National Broadband Network.

In an effort to head off the move against Turnbull and stake his own claim for the leadership, Treasurer Morrison this morning announced a 5G network ban on Huawei, as well as ZTE, another Chinese telco giant, because they were “likely to be subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government.”

The extreme-right tendencies emerging internationally can only gain a hearing because of the decades-long assault on the social rights and living standards of the working class by pro-capitalist parties once falsely described as the “left.”

Backed by the trade unions, the Australian Labor Party—like the US Democratic Party, Labour in Britain, the French Socialist Party and the German Social Democratic Party—has been at the forefront of this attack, as well as presiding over militarism and the undermining of democratic rights.

If a Labor government takes back office as a result of the collapse of the Coalition, it will deepen the onslaught on the working class imposed by the previous pro-corporate Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 and from 2007 to 2013, as well as continue Australia’s frontline involvement in Washington’s conflict with China.



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