

Sixth Australian prime minister ousted in 11 years

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Amid unprecedented scenes of chaos and conflict, Malcolm Turnbull was today ousted as prime minister of Australia after a political campaign against him organised by the most right-wing faction of the ruling Liberal Party. The extraordinary events of the past week point to the mounting instability and fragility wracking the parliamentary order.

After a narrow 45 to 40 party room vote to oust Turnbull, Treasurer Scott Morrison ultimately prevailed over Turnbull's extreme right-wing challenger, ex-Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, by a similar margin. Turnbull's deputy leader, Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop, had been eliminated in the first round of voting.

Australia, often falsely depicted as an exceptional and stable country, has become one of the most graphic examples of how longstanding political parties and institutions are breaking down under the pressure of mounting geo-strategic and class tensions internationally.

Since John Howard lost his own seat in the landslide defeat of the Liberal-National Coalition in 2007, every prime minister, whether Coalition or Labor, has been ousted. Counting Morrison, Australia has now had seven prime ministers in the past 11 years, four of whom were removed by backroom coups within their own parties.

The tearing down of Turnbull has surpassed the previous leadership coups in the bitterness and ferocity with which both factions fought for control of the government.

A political and ideological schism has opened up in the Liberal Party in response to the disintegration of the post-war global order and the bellicose efforts of US imperialism to maintain its waning world dominance. The Australian capitalist class has come under immense pressure from Washington to line up unconditionally behind its plans for a military confrontation with China, on whose markets significant sections of the Australian ruling elite depend heavily. This has been taken to a new height by the Trump administration's naked "America First" program of trade war and militarism.

At the same time, the Australian ruling class faces the prospect of an eruption of working-class resistance to

decades of falling real wages, declining social conditions and attacks on fundamental democratic rights. The Australian economy is deeply vulnerable to another global financial crisis, or trade retaliation by China over Canberra's backing of Washington.

The attempt to elevate Dutton is part of an ongoing effort, backed by sections of the ruling class and the Rupert Murdoch-owned media, to refashion the Liberal Party into a Trump-style extreme-right-wing movement. The aim of the Dutton wing, which includes former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, is to disorientate sections of the population with nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia, while trying to forge a base of support for US-Australian militarism against China and police state repression of the working class.

In broad terms, the extreme-right in Australia is paralleled by the Trump "alt-right" in the US and the range of ultra-right and neo-fascist parties that have come into prominence across Europe.

Other sections of the ruling class, personified by Turnbull, a millionaire former merchant banker, fear the potentially disastrous implications for capitalist rule of making such a shift. They are alarmed that the divisive and racist program of the far-right will only further radicalise workers and youth, who are already moving to the left in opposition to the ever-widening gulf between the super-rich and the working class.

Turnbull told a media conference yesterday that the coup against him was "a very deliberate effort to pull the Liberal Party further to the right." He went further, declaring: "The reality is that a minority in the party room supported by others outside the parliament have sought to bully, intimidate others into making this change of leadership that they're seeking."

Corporate media outlets interpreted these remarks as a reference to stridently conservative anti-Turnbull voices in the Murdoch media, including Sky TV, as well as Sydney's Radio 2GB. He may well, however, have been obliquely referring to interventions from Washington or by the Australian intelligence agencies.

Among those leading the charge against Turnbull have been figures closely associated with the US-linked military and intelligence forces, such as ex-military commanders Senator Jim Molan and Andrew Hastie, the parliamentary intelligence committee chairman. Over the past two years, a succession of key figures in the US ruling elite, including former National Intelligence Director James Clapper, ex-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and US Vice President Mike Pence, have visited Australia to insist that Canberra remain totally committed to Washington's geostrategic confrontation with China.

Since taking office in 2015, Turnbull has done everything possible to assure, first the Obama White House and then Trump's, of his unalloyed fidelity to the US military and security alliance, on which the Australian ruling elite has relied since World War II. He had to do so because in 2011, while in opposition, he accused former Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government of going too far in signing up to Obama's military and strategic "pivot" to Asia to confront China, which included agreeing to host US Marines in Darwin.

Moreover, Turnbull was aware that Gillard's predecessor, Kevin Rudd, was removed in 2010 by Labor Party and trade union factional heavyweights, acting in concert with the US embassy, because Rudd had proposed that Washington should make some accommodation to the rise of China.

Earlier this month, however, Turnbull gave a speech that would not have pleased the US ruling elite. He vowed his determination to maintain a "very deep" and growing relationship with China, the source of lucrative profits for mining companies, agribusinesses and universities. The move against Turnbull was certainly not opposed in Washington, if not tacitly endorsed.

Indicating how much is at stake, Turnbull threatened his colleagues that he would immediately resign his parliamentary seat if he was removed by Dutton, ending the government's one-seat majority and possibly forcing an early election. He has not yet indicated if he will follow through on that threat given that Morrison won the leadership ballot.

Morrison, a former property and tourism executive, was backed by Turnbull's supporters and by the financial elite. This morning's *Australian Financial Review* editorial said he appeared to be the Liberal Party's "best hope of bringing together the party's warring factions" and containing "boiling" voter anger after "four prime ministerial decapitations in eight years."

Another factor in Morrison's win may well have been Turnbull's last-minute bid to block Dutton by insisting that Solicitor-General Stephen Donoghue, the federal government's top legal officer, supply advice to the Liberal

Party by 8:30 this morning on the allegations that Dutton is constitutionally ineligible to sit in parliament because he and his wife control childcare centres that receive government subsidies.

Donoghue's less than clear advice was that Dutton was "not incapable of sitting" but there was "some risk" that the High Court could rule against him.

Morrison, a deeply right-wing figure himself, will try to straddle between the Dutton-Abbott faction and the Turnbull wing, which represents the most powerful, globally-connected financial and corporate interests. As immigration minister, he initiated "Operation Sovereign Borders" to militarily turn back refugee boats. As social services minister, he slashed welfare spending. Promoted to treasurer by Turnbull, he presided over austerity and efforts to push through massive corporate tax cuts.

Whatever overtures Morrison makes to achieve "unity," the closeness of the leadership vote leaves no doubt that the turmoil engulfing the Coalition will continue, raising the possibility of a split in the Liberal Party. While Dutton failed to take the leadership, his faction will seek to dictate the policy agenda of the government as the price for its ostensible loyalty. It will bide its time and most likely launch a challenge against Morrison at the first opportunity.

The crisis wracking the Liberal Party may well pave the way for the return of a Labor government. Any such government, led by former trade union head and key Rudd-Gillard minister Bill Shorten, would be no less committed than a Coalition government to the US alliance and to imposing the requirements of the ruling capitalist class, including by fomenting nationalist and anti-immigrant xenophobia as a means of splitting the working class.



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