

New Australian prime minister forms cabinet after endorsement from Washington

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27 August 2018

Scott Morrison, Australia's new prime minister—the country's seventh in just 11 years—spent the weekend receiving the congratulations of the Trump administration and other US allies, and selecting his cabinet.

Morrison won a leadership ballot of the governing Liberal Party on Friday afternoon, after former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was ousted in a political coup organised by the party's most right-wing faction. Turnbull's so-called “moderate” supporters within the party threw their backing behind Morrison to prevent the victory of Peter Dutton, the candidate of the right. Morrison, an extreme right-wing figure himself, was elected as the “compromise” leader by just 45 votes to Dutton's 40.

Turnbull is the fourth elected prime minister since 2010 who has been torn down by his or her own party, before finishing a single term in office. Even before Turnbull's demise, the regularity with which political leaders have been axed had led the British Broadcasting Corporation to label Australia as the “coup capital of the world.”

Turnbull himself gained the leadership of the Liberal Party in September 2015 by organising the removal of Tony Abbott, who had led the party to victory in the September 2013 election against the Labor Party. Labor had its own coups in June 2010, when Kevin Rudd was ousted by Julia Gillard, and again in June 2013, when Gillard was removed and Rudd reinstalled.

The constant factors in the intractable political turmoil in Australia have been the mounting geostrategic tensions between the US and China, and the immense disaffection, throughout the population, with the parliamentary establishment, due to rapidly falling living standards and ever-widening social inequality.

In 2010, Rudd's removal was in large part due to his hesitation to align Australia fully with the openly confrontational policy being advanced by the United States, Australia's strategic ally and largest source of investment, against China, the country's largest export market and trading partner. The Labor powerbrokers who ousted him were in close contact with the US embassy, which

characterised them as its “protected sources” in diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks.

Since the Rudd coup, and under the Gillard, Abbott and Turnbull governments, Australia has served as a crucial partner in the US military build-up in Asia and one of Washington's closest allies on the world arena. Canberra has backed every US-led war and intrigue—from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine, to the persecution of WikiLeaks' editor Julian Assange, to the denunciations of China over its territorial claims in the South China Sea and other issues.

Since late 2016, the Turnbull government, fully supported by Labor and the media, has waged a xenophobic campaign against purported Chinese “influence” in Australian business, politics and society, culminating in the ramming through in June of anti-democratic “foreign interference” laws, targeting Chinese individuals and business interests. The new legislation could also be used to criminalise opposition to US and Australian militarism.

Internal class tensions, however, have continued to escalate. Sections of big business are continuing to complain that the unconditional support for Washington's confrontation with Beijing is threatening their critical markets in China.

Fear of an eruption of the working class led Turnbull to retreat from some of the most severe austerity policies of the previous Abbott-led government. But it also left him incapable of winning support for his key policies-- a pro-business restructuring of the energy industry and massive corporate tax cuts--from various right-wing populist parties that control the balance of power in the upper house of parliament.

This year, amid international warnings that Trump's policies were threatening to trigger a second global financial crisis, Turnbull's foreign minister Julie Bishop publicly rejected US calls for direct military participation in so-called “freedom of navigation” provocations in the South China Sea. Moreover, just two weeks ago, Turnbull delivered a major speech in which he sought to distance Australia from

Trump's trade war measures against China.

In the final analysis, the move against Turnbull is part of a conscious and ongoing campaign to refashion the Liberal Party into one prepared to confront and ride rough-shod over both the working class and those sections of the corporate and financial elites that oppose confrontation with China.

The aim of the Dutton faction, which includes Tony Abbott and enjoys the full backing of the Rupert Murdoch-owned media, is to consolidate a right-wing base of support by blaming the acute social crisis on too much immigration and social welfare spending. Key figures in this faction, such as former military officers Andrew Hastie and General Jim Molan, are determined to use the foreign interference laws to prosecute alleged "agents of Chinese influence" and stoke virulent xenophobia against China.

The policies and demagoguery of the Dutton-Abbott wing broadly parallel those of the pro-Trump "alt-right" in the US and the range of extreme-right and neo-fascist movements that have emerged to prominence across Europe. As international relations and parliamentary democratic forms of rule break down, preparations are being made to use authoritarian, police-state measures to defend the financial and corporate oligarchy against mass opposition from the working class to social inequality and war.

While Dutton lost his leadership bid, the right faction will put its mark on all the policies of the Morrison government. In the name of "uniting" the party, Morrison's "compromise" was to reinstate Dutton and some of his main backers, along with the three crucial figures in the challenge to Turnbull: Mathias Cormann, Michaelia Cash and Mitch Fifield, who continue to hold their senior cabinet posts.

Turnbull and Julie Bishop, reflecting the marginalisation of their "moderate" positions, have announced they will resign from the parliament.

Regardless of whether the US had a direct hand in the move against Turnbull, his ouster was welcomed in Washington. Trump took time out on the weekend to hold a "very warm" phone call with Morrison, in which the two pledged to uphold the US-Australia alliance. Morrison invited the US president—who is deeply unpopular in Australia—to visit the country as soon as possible.

Morrison's apparent intention, reflected in his cabinet selections, is to hold together both the Liberal Party and its coalition with the rural-based National Party until he is forced to call the next election—which must be held by mid-May 2019.

Most of the policies his government will take to the election are already being implemented. These include ongoing cost-cutting to public health, public education and social welfare, and massive increases to military spending to finance the war preparations against China.

There is little question that Morrison, his new treasurer and former investment banker Josh Frydenberg, and finance minister Mathias Cormann remain determined to introduce major cuts to the corporate tax rate and to personal income taxes on the wealthy.

This reactionary economic agenda will be combined with attempts to divert social discontent into anti-immigrant xenophobia. Morrison declared earlier this year his support for a "cap" on annual migration; he has long been a ruthless advocate of the bipartisan Liberal/Labor policy of preventing refugees from reaching Australia by boat, and thus from claiming asylum.

Both the Liberal and National parties are desperate to win back the large section of their voter base that has switched to supporting various right-wing populist formations, such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation, which blame the social crisis in working class and rural areas on immigration and welfare spending.

The Labor Party, headed by former union leader and Rudd-Gillard minister Bill Shorten, is trying to win government by posturing as an advocate social inequality and a "progressive" alternative to the Coalition.

The reality is that for the past four decades, Labor and the trade unions have been committed to maintaining the "international competitiveness" of Australian capitalism. This has translated, under Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 and from 2007 to 2013, into attacks on workers' wages and conditions, austerity cuts to social spending and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. And Labor has more than matched the most right-wing faction of the Liberal Party in demonising refugees and blaming immigration for the lack of much-needed infrastructure and rising unemployment.

Labor is no "lesser evil." If it is returned to government it will deepen the country's military alignment with the US against China and impose the full burden of the mounting economic crisis directly onto the working class.

The urgent task of facing the working class is to assert its own independent class interests through the development of a mass, socialist and internationalist movement against all the establishment parties and against the capitalist profit system that they defend.



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