

Ex-Australian prime minister to quit, leaving government in minority

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Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted as prime minister last Friday, last night confirmed he will quit parliament this week, thus stripping the government of its one-seat majority until a by-election can be held in his inner-Sydney electorate. Turnbull's decision underscores the fragility of the Liberal-National Coalition government, as well as the intensity of the rifts tearing it apart.

In a resignation letter to his constituents, made public last night, Turnbull wrote of the "shocking and shameful events of last week—a pointless week of madness that disgraced our parliament and appalled our nation."

While Turnbull had threatened, during last week's turmoil, to leave parliament immediately if he were removed from office, last night's announcement came after two developments that indicated the underlying content of his ouster via backroom machinations.

One was President Donald Trump's rapid endorsement of Turnbull's axing. Less than a day after being installed as prime minister, former Treasurer Scott Morrison received a congratulatory phone call from Trump. "Had a great discussion with @realDonaldTrump this morning," Morrison said on Saturday. "We affirmed the strength of the relationship between the US and Australia."

Morrison used the call to invite Trump to visit Australia, despite the widespread public hostility towards the US president. "Both underlined the strength and depth of our alliance and the unbreakable friendship between Australia and the United States," Morrison's spokesperson said. "Both leaders agreed to stay in contact and to meet at an early opportunity."

After Saturday's call, Trump took to Twitter to declare: "Congratulations to new Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. There are no greater friends than the United States and Australia!"

This exchange, in which Trump made no mention of Turnbull, let alone any pretence of thanking him for his service, sent a clear signal of Washington's warm

embrace, and at least tacit endorsement, of the inner-party coup.

Turnbull's foreign minister, Julie Bishop, also refused to serve in Morrison's cabinet and announced her own departure from parliament. Both were totally committed to the US military and security alliance, on which the Australian ruling class has relied since World War II. They supported a xenophobic campaign over the past two years accusing China of "interfering" in Australia, and committed to back the US in any confrontation with North Korea or China.

However, they had balked at sending Australian warships or planes into the South China Sea to directly challenge China's territorial claims over reefs there, and two weeks ago Turnbull gave a speech seeking to repair relations with China, the Australian ruling class's largest export market.

The other development was Morrison's rewarding of the key cabinet ministers who either plotted Turnbull's removal or delivered the final blow. In particular, on Sunday Morrison not only retained Peter Dutton, who spearheaded the challenge to Turnbull, as home affairs minister. He gave some of his most senior cabinet posts to three crucial figures in the challenge to Turnbull—Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, Jobs Minister Michaelia Cash and Communications Minister Mitch Fifield.

It is now clear, from the bitter recriminations displayed in the corporate media, that if this trio had not publicly declared that Turnbull had lost the support of the majority of Liberal Party parliamentarians, the challenge to Turnbull would have failed. The final vote to oust Turnbull, 45 to 40, itself showed that without those three defectors, no majority existed.

Ultimately, faced with defeat after the trio's announcement, Turnbull threw his support behind Morrison last Friday in order to thwart his original challenger, Peter Dutton, who had become the figurehead

of the Liberal Party's most rabidly right-wing elements, including those associated with ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull had deposed in September 2015.

By handing back major ministries to the coup architects, and rewarding several others associated with the plotting, Morrison demonstrated that, while the Dutton-Abbott wing has not yet taken full control of the party, they are increasingly dictating its terms and policies. In the final party room ballot, Dutton came close to defeating Morrison, losing by just 45 to 40.

Morrison, an arch-conservative himself, was advanced as the best hope of holding the warring factions together for now. Despite being termed in the media as "a moderate," he has a long record of supporting the most right-wing elements, including on military operations to repel asylum seekers, slashing welfare entitlements, boosting military spending and opposing same-sex marriage.

The events of the past few days confirm that the move against Turnbull is part of an ongoing campaign to refashion the Liberal Party into the means to confront both the intense opposition in the working class to the corporate austerity program of the political establishment and those sections of the ruling class that oppose direct conflict with China.

The Dutton-Abbott faction is seeking to build a right-wing base of support by demonising oppressed sections of the population such as immigrants and welfare recipients. Key US-backed figures in the faction, such as former military officers Andrew Hastie and General Jim Molan, are also determined to stoke xenophobia against alleged "agents of Chinese influence."

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

Turnbull, a millionaire former merchant banker, represents financial and corporate interests that oppose the turn to "America First" style protectionism and trade war, which could have disastrous implications for Australian capitalism. They also fear that the repressive and divisive policies of the Dutton-Abbott camp could further radicalise workers and youth who already regard the parliamentary elite with hostility and disgust.

Because of this mounting public disaffection, successive

governments, both Coalition and Labor, have been unable to carry through the full agenda demanded by the financial elite. Last week Turnbull finally abandoned his signature economic policy of handing multi-billion dollar tax cuts to the largest banks and corporations.

In this political crisis, the opposition Labor Party is positioning itself to return to office, promising the ruling class it will provide a more stable means of implementing savage austerity measures. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013 were instrumental in carrying out the deepening assault on the working class.

With Turnbull out of parliament, Labor leader Bill Shorten said Australia was "in the zone of minority government." He told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio: "The last thing this nation needs is the axe of minority government hanging over the head of the nation."

"Liberals need to do some time in opposition to understand how fundamentally people don't like this... Why did we go through all of this? Why is Australia called the coup capital of the world of western democracies?"

On the core political agenda, however, Labor has no disagreement with the further lurch to the right and whipping up of xenophobia and militarism. Together with the trade unions, Labor supports agitation against "foreign workers," helped push through "foreign interference" laws for use against anyone linked to China or opposition to war, and backs the \$200 billion military expansion program currently underway.



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