

Conflicts inside Liberal Party shed light on lurch to right in Australian government

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Numerous complaints of “bullying and intimidation” have been levelled against right-wing leaders in the ruling Liberal Party by members of parliament who supported Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull before he was ousted last Friday.

The allegations point to the ferocity and ruthlessness with which the forces behind Turnbull’s removal are working to refashion the Liberal Party, one of the pillars of two-party parliamentary stability since World War II, into an extreme right-wing formation in terms of both foreign and domestic policy. In the process, the right faction is prepared to tear the organisation apart if necessary.

Last week, Turnbull and his supporters thwarted the man who fronted the right-wing inner-party coup, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton. They managed to secure Turnbull’s replacement as prime minister by Scott Morrison, who defeated Dutton in a party room ballot by 45 votes to 40. Nonetheless, a civil war is still raging, with the “conservative” forces, including former prime minister Tony Abbott, increasingly ascendant.

Liberal Party MP Julia Banks, a Turnbull supporter, this week denounced “internal political games, factional party figures, self-proclaimed power-brokers and certain media personalities who bear vindictive, mean-spirited grudges intent on settling their personal scores.” According to 9NEWS, Banks alleged she was told that her support for Turnbull was “very damaging for you.”

Banks announced she will not recontest her inner-Melbourne electorate of Chisholm, making it more likely that the government will lose the seat at the next election. Banks issued a statement attributing the threats made against Turnbull’s supporters to “cultural and gender bias, bullying and intimidation” of women in politics.

Despite framing her complaints as gender-based, Banks provided some indication of the concerns wracking the Turnbull wing of the party, which represents the interests

of key sections of the globally-connected financial elite.

These elements fear that the lurch toward anti-immigrant witch hunting, nationalist anti-Chinese demagoguery about “foreign interference” and more aggressive backing for US militarism could politically backfire. They are acutely aware of the already widespread popular hostility to the political establishment after decades of attacks on the social conditions of the working class and soaring social inequality.

Banks said she had received “hundreds of emails and calls” from her constituents making “very clear” that they had wanted Turnbull to remain prime minister. Banks described her electorate, which has a substantial Chinese-Australian population, as “one of the most multicultural” in Australia.

Likewise, former Small and Family Business Minister Craig Laundy told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” on Monday that at least three female politicians said they had been “stood over” to sign a petition to back Turnbull’s removal. Laundy refused to serve in Morrison’s ministry and is reportedly considering quitting parliament as well.

More MPs could join the exodus. *News.com* reported that “Liberal sources” had told it that other disillusioned MPs were “considering their futures.”

Turnbull not only intends to quit his seat but has stated his intention to leave the country and take up residence in his luxury apartment overlooking New York’s Central Park. He will not support the Liberal Party in the by-election for his inner-Sydney seat, which the government could well lose, throwing it into minority status.

Western Australian Senator Linda Reynolds told the Senate last week that the “bullying and intimidation” was “behaviour that I simply do not recognise and I think has no place in my party or in this chamber.”

As part of his apparent bid to paper over the party’s internal warfare, at least for now, Morrison subsequently

appointed Reynolds as assistant minister for Home Affairs. She readily accepted the post, even though it means being directly subordinate to Dutton, whom Morrison retained as Home Affairs minister.

The schism also involves the Liberals' coalition partners, the rural-based National Party. One of its MPs, Kevin Hogan, whose electorate covers the north-eastern tip of New South Wales, said he would move to the non-government crossbench, although he pledged to support the government on votes of no confidence. Hogan said he "will never look at Canberra in quite the same way again" after last week's events.

By contrast to Turnbull and his backers who are getting out, Morrison and the Abbott-Dutton camp have gone on the offensive. Morrison bluntly claimed there was "absolutely no suggestion" any of his supporters had been involved in bullying.

Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger, a right-wing factional powerbroker, dismissed the complaints as "scuttlebutt, innuendo, rumour." At the same time, he openly defended the use of pressure tactics, declaring that "politics is a bit of a rough business."

Unlike Turnbull, Abbott has announced that he will recontest his seat at the next election, leaving open the possibility of him returning to the Liberal leadership if the government is defeated. Morrison did not bring Abbott back into the cabinet, fearing the popular outcry if he publicly rewarded Abbott for months of agitation against Turnbull. Nevertheless, in a clear overture to Abbott and his faction, Morrison has appointed the ex-prime minister to a newly-created position of "special envoy on indigenous affairs."

The appointment gives Abbott a platform to espouse his reactionary views, including his advocacy of slashing funds for basic services to Aboriginal people, which were cut by \$500 million during his time as prime minister from 2013 to 2015. Abbott told the *Daily Telegraph*, Rupert Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, that his priority would be to "improve attendance rates and school performance." Already, indigenous families are threatened with being stripped of welfare benefits if their children fail to attend classes.

As part of the ongoing internecine warfare between the rival factions in the Liberal Party, Dutton is now the subject of allegations of personally granting visas to two au pairs whose services were required by his friends or members of the wealthy elite. He also faces a potential High Court challenge to his eligibility to sit in parliament because of an alleged financial conflict of interest.

Even if Dutton falls, however, the operation to refashion the Liberal Party into a far-right formation will continue. Paralleling developments internationally, the post-World War II parties of capitalist rule are breaking apart in the face of rising class tensions and the bellicose drive by the US ruling class to assert global hegemony via trade war and military aggression.

Over the past two decades, since the initial arrival of Pauline Hanson's xenophobic One Nation in parliament in 1996, various failed attempts have been made to build a far-right movement outside the two main ruling parties, the Coalition and Labor.

Headed by an assortment of ex-Coalition populists, including Hanson, business entrepreneur Clive Palmer, the stridently anti-immigrant Bob Katter and most recently Australian Conservatives Senator Cory Bernardi, these breakaways have sought to mobilise disoriented layers of the population and channel their discontent in nationalist, xenophobic and militarist directions.

As in the US, with Donald Trump's ascension in the Republican Party backed by the "alt-right" of Steve Bannon and other fascistic demagogues, a push is now underway to draw this constituency back behind the Liberal-National Coalition.

Interlaced with that operation is the insistence from Washington that the Australian government, whether under the Coalition or Labor, stand unequivocally on the frontline with the US as it prepares for war against China.



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