

Ousted Australian prime minister denounces right-wing “coup”

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There were more questions than answers when recently-removed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull appeared on a special one-hour edition of the “Q&A” television program on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television last night.

The program was billed as tackling the question that no one in the government has answered: why was Turnbull ousted from office on August 24? But Turnbull repeatedly refused to offer any explanation for what he called a “coup.” Instead, he attributed it to “madness,” before finally conceding: “But, clearly, that’s pretty inadequate.”

In various ways, despite refusing to answer the central question, Turnbull pointed to the reality: a relentless far-right push, backed by the Murdoch media, to transform the Liberal and National parties into a Donald Trump-style formation in order to channel rising social discontent in reactionary nationalist and xenophobic directions and prepare for war with China.

Turnbull’s appearance highlights the political and geo-strategic tensions convulsing the ruling Liberal-National Coalition and the political establishment as a whole. Even the fact that he was given a full hour for a solo performance on one of the country’s most prominent current affairs platforms indicates deep fissures wracking the ruling capitalist class.

The ex-prime minister charged leading Liberal Party politicians, including cabinet ministers, with “taking a successful, competitive government and literally blowing it up.” He named nine of them, led by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Health Minister Greg Hunt and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann.

Only these people, Turnbull claimed, could explain why he was ousted in a Liberal Party parliamentary caucus vote, and he insisted they had a responsibility to the public to do so. He accused a right-wing minority of

launching a political wrecking operation.

Turnbull declared: “What you’ve seen increasingly from the right, even if they’re not in the majority, they’ll say, ‘If you don’t give us what we want, we’ll blow the show up.’ That is intimidating and that is bullying, and that was at the heart of the coup back in August. Now that is a real threat to the Liberal Party.”

A wealthy former investment banker who represents the interests of the financial elite, Turnbull warned that the Liberal Party, one of the twin political pillars of the ruling establishment since World War II, was being “frayed.” He blamed a toxic feedback loop created by conservative commentators on Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News and the *Australian* newspaper.

Despite their small audiences, these outlets, Turnbull said, influenced Liberal Party branch members, even though recent election losses, including in his own previous electorate of Wentworth in eastern Sydney, showed such views were widely rejected.

Turnbull blamed the result in Wentworth, which the Liberal Party lost for the first time in history, on a disastrous final week leading into the October 20 by-election. In that week the government supported a white supremacist “It’s OK to be white” resolution moved in the Senate by Pauline Hanson, the leader of the anti-immigrant One Nation party, and proposed to follow the Trump administration in relocating Australia’s Israeli embassy to the contested city of Jerusalem and repudiating the nuclear agreement with Iran.

Pointing to similar conflicts wracking the rural-based National Party, Turnbull also criticised former Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, who represents the most right-wing populist elements in the Nationals. Turnbull said Joyce had not helped the government in the Wentworth by-election by fuelling leadership instability in the Nationals and proposing a new coal-fired power station.

Turnbull claimed that internal Liberal Party polling had predicted that his government would have won the next national election. This was why the right-wing forces wanted to oust him, he suggested, alleging a “self-destructive” lurch to the right.

Significantly, Turnbull confirmed he had personally complained, unsuccessfully, to Murdoch about hostile coverage by Murdoch’s media outlets. He also recounted a conversation with another media mogul, Kerry Stokes, in which Stokes, who controls the Seven TV network and the *West Australian*, warned him that Murdoch had declared: “Malcolm has to go.”

Turnbull said he had cautioned Murdoch that the only beneficiary of any leadership coup would be Labor Party leader Bill Shorten. He confirmed Murdoch had told Stokes that three years of Labor “wouldn’t be so bad.”

These revelations, which Stokes and Murdoch’s News Limited vehemently denied during September, shed further light on the underlying driving forces behind Turnbull’s removal.

Murdoch’s media empire, featuring Fox News, prominently backs Trump’s “America First” drive to reassert the post-World War II hegemony of US capitalism and to cultivate an extreme right-wing populist movement to counter the mounting discontent of the working class.

Murdoch platforms have been in the forefront of pursuing the interests of US imperialism against its identified enemies, particularly Russia and China. This has been accompanied by escalating pressure exerted by the US intelligence, military and political establishment on the Australian government to line up unconditionally behind Washington’s intensifying trade war and wider economic and military confrontation with China.

As an ABC interview with ex-Trump adviser and “alt-right” leader Steve Bannon confirmed, the Australian prime minister was regarded in Washington as “too much of an appeaser” of China. Bannon’s interview was recorded while Turnbull was still prime minister, then broadcast just after his ouster.

During his three years in office, Turnbull did everything he could to convince, first Barack Obama, and then Trump of his government’s commitment to the US strategic alliance, on which Australian imperialism has relied for its own predatory activities across the Asia-Pacific region since World War II.

Not a single question of foreign policy was aired during last night’s show, despite the escalating confrontation between Washington and Beijing, which has potentially

catastrophic implications for Australian capitalism. Nonetheless, Turnbull was again at pains to insist that the “US relationship” remained “very, very strong.”

While the relations between the respective military and intelligence apparatuses are certainly “very, very strong,” Turnbull was seen as unreliable because of his reluctance to join provocative US military operations against China in the South China Sea and his efforts to protect the profit interests of those sections of Australian business most reliant on China. Just two weeks before he was removed, Turnbull delivered a speech calling for a “reset” of a “very deep relationship” with China.

The Turnbull-Stokes-Murdoch conversations also demonstrate Murdoch’s readiness to support a Labor government, backed by the trade unions, even if only for three years while a new far-right formation is forged. Labor is fully committed to the US alliance and has taken office in previous periods of crisis, including World Wars I and II, to impose the burden of war and austerity on the working class.

On last night’s program, Turnbull ludicrously painted his government as a success. He listed “achievements” such as “record jobs growth, economic growth, reduced personal income tax, reduced company tax, changes to school funding and record funding for health and pharmaceutical benefits.” He boasted that his government had stopped the arrival of refugee boats, and he defended the barbaric detention of asylum seekers on remote Pacific islands.

The truth is that years of stagnant or falling real wages, replacement of full-time jobs by poorly-paid and insecure casual and part-time employment, tax handouts to the corporate elite and deteriorating public education and health, under successive Coalition and Labor governments, have created ever-more glaring social inequality and political disaffection.

As in the US and across Europe, the discredited old political parties are imploding and capitalist politics is being reshaped along far-right, nationalist and authoritarian lines in an attempt to confuse and divert the discontent and the resulting turn by workers and young people toward socialist answers.



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