

Australia's governing Liberal Party wracked by factional conflicts

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Australia's Liberal Party, which is in a federal coalition government with the rural-based National Party, continues to be wracked by bitter factional conflicts in the wake of the August political coup that ousted Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and installed Scott Morrison in his place.

Public blows traded between Morrison and his supporters, and the Turnbull wing of the party over the past week have raised the prospect of a split.

The divisions, over how best the Australian ruling elite can respond to deepening geopolitical tensions between the US and China, economic volatility and seething discontent in the working class, are being compounded by the prospect that the Liberal-National Coalition will suffer a landslide defeat in an election that must be held by May 18.

Morrison's government, which lost its lower house majority when Turnbull quit parliament, has been able to remain in office only because the Labor Party opposition and crossbench MPs have not seriously challenged it. They, along with the corporate elite, fear that the crisis of the government threatens the stability of the entire parliamentary set-up.

The latest turmoil erupted when media reports last weekend revealed that Turnbull had been denouncing the prime minister in private discussions with Liberal state MPs in New South Wales (NSW). Turnbull allegedly said Morrison's only concern was "keeping his arse on CI," the prime minister's official car. The former leader reportedly said Morrison should call an early election on March 2.

Since then, Turnbull has refused to deny making the comments. They were leaked to the media, deepening the government's crisis, while Morrison was in Argentina for the G20 summit.

The Turnbull's self-styled "progressive" wing of the

party is agitating for a federal election to be held before the NSW state election, which is scheduled for March 23, because the widespread hostility to the Morrison government will increase the prospect that the NSW Liberal government of Gladys Berejiklian will be swept from office, following a major Liberal defeat in the Victorian state election on November 24.

On Monday morning, Turnbull publicly demanded an early federal election, so that Berejiklian could "go to the polls and be judged on her record rather than being hit by the brand damage that arose from the very destructive, pointless, shameful leadership change in Canberra in August."

An anonymous NSW Liberal MP told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Monday that the state government wanted Morrison to call a federal election "that afternoon." Another said Turnbull was "just saying what everyone wants."

Morrison sought to hit back at Turnbull by directly intervening in the internal affairs of the NSW party. He reportedly spent much of Sunday making phone calls to party figures, demanding that they ensure federal MP Craig Kelly, a member of the party's most right-wing faction, be pre-selected for the forthcoming federal election.

Kelly was likely to lose the internal ballot for Liberal candidacy in his southern Sydney electorate of Hughes. In response, Kelly threatened to quit the Liberal Party and move to the crossbench, placing the government even further into a minority on the floor of parliament. Despite Turnbull publicly denouncing any move to bow to Kelly's threat, Morrison prevailed, convincing the Liberal NSW state executive to dictate Kelly's selection.

Kelly has been a vociferous opponent of Turnbull and a prominent supporter of the right-wing faction that

serves as Morrison's base.

There have been calls from this constituency for Morrison to intervene also in support of Jim Molan, a far-right federal Liberal senator and retired military major general. A key backer of the coup against Turnbull, Molan was relegated last month to an unwinnable fourth position on the party's NSW senate ticket.

The machinations in NSW follow a series of blows to the crisis-ridden Morrison government.

On Saturday, Michael Kroger, a Morrison supporter, resigned as president of the Victorian state Liberal Party, after former state Premier Jeff Kennett and Turnbull backers demanded he step down following the unprecedented swings against the Liberals in the Victorian election.

The Liberals' vote plunged by at least 6 percent, amid widespread hostility to its racist "law and order" campaign, and the party's blatant turn to anti-immigrant xenophobia and right-wing populism.

Kroger's resignation came just after federal MP Julia Banks, who holds a Victorian seat, announced on November 27 she was quitting the government and moving to the cross-bench. Banks repeated her claim that she was "bullied" by the anti-Turnbull faction led by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and declared on Sunday that the voices of party "moderates" had been "drowned out by the right wing."

In a desperate drive to reassert his authority, Morrison called an unscheduled federal party-room meeting last night to push through changes to procedures for unseating a prime minister. The new rules, which passed, require a two-thirds vote by the party room for a spill to be called against a prime minister who had won a federal election.

The move does little to guarantee Morrison's leadership, because he has not won an election, but was installed by the party-room.

The real purpose of the meeting it appears, was to assert Morrison's control over the party. He used it to demonstrate his close ties to former prime ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott, whom he consulted on the change. Abbott was a key architect of Turnbull's ouster.

Editorials in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* and the Fairfax Media's *Australian Financial Review* hailed Morrison's move. The *Australian* declared: "The time

for Scott Morrison to appease Malcolm Turnbull is over."

An *Australian* opinion piece by businessman Maurice Newman pointed to the agenda underlying this support for Turnbull's removal. Newman denounced the former prime minister as a "progressive" and rejected his defence of the "broad church" conception of the Liberal Party associated with post-World War II Prime Minister Robert Menzies. Newman wrote of Menzies: "Not for him the fashionable Left. He was a nationalist, not a globalist. He was a monarchist, not a republican."

Newman's article accused Turnbull of failing to appeal to "the forgotten people" of the "hollowed out middle-class," whose conditions of life had been decimated by "crony capitalism." Newman concluded by pointing to the possibility of a party emerging in the wake of a federal election "out of the ashes" of a defeated Liberal Party.

Behind the August coup is a push to refashion the Liberals into a far-right party, based on populism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism, in line with similar movements in Europe and the United States. It is aimed at channelling widespread disaffection into reactionary channels and cultivating a constituency that can be mobilised against the emerging social and political struggles of the working class.

Morrison also was at pains during the G20 summit to express his support for US President Donald Trump. Turnbull had, before his ouster, expressed concerns that the Trump administration's "America First" program and aggressive confrontation with China could jeopardise the Australian ruling elite's trading relations.



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