

Minister's resignation highlights unravelling of Australia's ruling Coalition

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Two developments this week point to the intensifying rifts tearing apart the governing Liberal-National Coalition—one of the main parties of capitalist rule in Australia since World War II—as well as the growing popular disaffection with the entire political establishment, including Labor and the Greens.

The first event was the supposedly unexpected announcement last Sunday by senior cabinet minister Kelly O'Dwyer that she would quit parliament at the looming federal election, which must be held by May. She is a supporter of Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted as the Coalition's prime minister last August.

The second was a call last Monday by Tony Abbott, a previously-deposed Coalition prime minister, for disenchanted voters to support the opposition Labor Party rather than independents, because Labor was a politically responsible "party of government."

O'Dwyer, the minister for jobs, industrial relations and women, cited "very personal reasons" of wanting to spend time with her children. But there was no mistaking the political implications of her move, which the media reported as a "shock."

On one level, it was a desertion from an apparently sinking ship. Polling continues to indicate that the Coalition faces a severe defeat at the election. There was speculation that O'Dwyer could even lose her inner-Melbourne seat, previously regarded as a "blue ribbon" Liberal Party electorate.

In damage control mode, Prime Minister Scott Morrison stood beside O'Dwyer as she announced her decision. He insisted she had his "full support" in making a "great choice" for her family, and he wanted her to continue as minister until the election. Morrison evidently wanted to avoid another cabinet reshuffle, but that leaves the key post of industrial relations—that is dealing with the working class—in the hands of a lame duck.

Clearly, O'Dwyer's action goes deeper. It undermines Morrison's efforts to hold the government together while shifting the Coalition further to the right, in league with

Abbott and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton. Together, they triggered last August's removal of Turnbull, the leader of the Liberal Party's self-titled "socially progressive and economically conservative" wing.

Twice last year, O'Dwyer spoke out against the Abbott-Dutton wing, which is seeking to refashion the Coalition into a Trump-style right-wing populist formation. This faction is trying to divert the rising social discontent, produced by destruction of permanent jobs, falling living standards and decaying social services, in reactionary nationalist, anti-immigrant and "law and order" directions.

In early September, just after Turnbull's dumping, O'Dwyer told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that members of the right faction had subjected Liberal Party parliamentarians to "threats, intimidation and bullying" in order to remove Turnbull.

Following the Liberal Party's heavy defeat in November's Victorian state election, O'Dwyer told a party room meeting that "crusades" by "ideological warriors" among her colleagues had hijacked the party and left it regarded by voters as "homophobic, anti-women, climate-change deniers."

As soon as O'Dwyer announced her departure, Turnbull took to twitter to hail her as a "true liberal." Her move sparked reports that other government MPs could make similar announcements, including two Turnbull ministers who refused to serve under Morrison—Julie Bishop who was foreign minister, and Craig Laundy, who was small business and workplace minister. Immigration Minister David Coleman, another Turnbull backer, was also named.

They would follow other Liberal Party MPs in not contesting the election. They include Julia Banks, who quit the party after Turnbull's removal, Ann Sudalis, who was targeted for a pre-selection challenge by the right faction, and David Bushby, the chief government whip in the Senate, a right-wing faction member to whom the government last week handed a plum job as Consul-General in Chicago.

Unnamed Liberal Party "sources" told journalists that key ministers were likely to quit as well if the party suffered a

seismic defeat at the election. Those mentioned were Defence Minister Christopher Pyne and Foreign Minister Marise Payne—two leading members of Turnbull’s “moderate” wing—and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, who swung behind Turnbull’s replacement by Morrison.

The crisis engulfing the government only intensified yesterday, following Morrison’s decision to install prominent indigenous businessman Warren Mundine as the Liberal candidate for a regional New South Wales (NSW) seat, at the expense of the already nominated local candidate, Grant Schultz.

Schultz responded by resigning from the Liberal Party, publicly denouncing Morrison and announcing he would stand against Mundine as an “independent.”

The ABC reported today: “Angry Liberals are tearing up their party memberships on the New South Wales south coast over the decision.” Among those who have resigned are the presidents of two local branches. Gerringong branch president Philip Motby told the ABC: “Head office seem to think they know more than we do so they’re bringing their man in. That’s fine, [then] let them come in and man the polling booths and do the running around.”

Abbott’s remarks take on a particular significance in this context. He told 2GB radio: “If you want a credible parliament, if you want serious government don’t vote independent. It is better to vote for the Labor Party than to vote for an independent. Because for all Labor’s faults at least they are a party of government or potential government and that means there is a level of responsibility which the Labor Party has to take, which no independent or minor party does.”

This message echoes the reported comments of Rupert Murdoch in telling a fellow media mogul, Kerry Stokes, last year that “Turnbull has to go,” even if it meant a period of Labor government. Murdoch, a major figure in the US and global corporate elite, reportedly said he could make money under Labor and the trade unions.

Under conditions of a rapidly deteriorating economic situation internationally and in Australia—including a US-China trade war, slowing Chinese and global growth, falling share and property prices—the ruling class would rely on a Labor government to impose the burden of a crash onto the back of working class households.

Labor, backed by the trade unions, has served this function for more than a century, taking office in periods of crisis, such as war and economic breakdown, to inflict sacrifice on the population.

At the same time, Abbott’s plea to voters reflects fears in ruling circles that this bitter record is now fuelling a deeper political disenchantment that so-called independents and minor parties can exploit, further destabilising the

parliamentary order that has maintained capitalist rule since the late 19th century.

With voting support for the establishment parties plunging over the past quarter century, Australia’s political system has become increasingly unstable, with seven short-lived prime ministers since 2007.

Various far-right formations are jostling to outflank the Coalition in trying to channel the unrest in reactionary directions. Abbott specifically attacked iron ore billionaire Clive Palmer, who has vowed to plunge more than \$50 million into an election campaign for his rebadged United Australia Party (formerly the Palmer United Party).

After being wiped out in the 2016 election, Palmer’s party has just one member of parliament, Senator Brian Burston, who defected last year from another right-wing party, Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant One Nation. Palmer is bombarding voters with television advertisements, roadside billboards and unsolicited text messages in the hope of filling the political vacuum created by the discrediting of the Coalition, Labor and the Greens.

Also vying for position are One Nation, Liberal Party defector Cory Bernardi’s Australian Conservatives, Bob Katter’s Australian Party and the recently registered Fraser Anning Conservative National Party. Anning, a previous member of both One Nation and Katter’s party, used his maiden speech in parliament last year to demand a “final solution” to stop immigration and a return to the racist “White Australia” policy.

Labor, while claiming to oppose the far-right groups, is fully committed to enforcing the dictates of the financial elite if it returns to office, creating fertile ground for these formations.

Above all, together with Labor, these outfits and assorted independents are trying to head off an eruption of strikes and other forms of working class opposition. Their greatest fear is a turn by workers and youth toward a socialist perspective, as the only alternative to capitalism’s escalating social inequality and lurch toward war.



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