

More ministers quit as factional war wracks Australia's ruling coalition

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Last weekend, less than three months before a general election must be held, two more cabinet ministers announced their departures from Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government. That took to six the number of top-level ministers or ex-ministers who have made similar declarations in the past month that they will not contest the looming election.

The corporate media depicted the resignations as simply "more rats deserting a sinking ship," pointing to media polls predicting the government's defeat. More fundamentally, however, the desertions point to an intensifying breakup of the Liberal and National parties and a deep crisis of the entire Australian political establishment.

All the ministers who decided to quit are either members of the Liberal Party's supposed "moderate" wing, associated with Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted as prime minister last August, or were sidelined by the "conservative" faction following the installation of Scott Morrison to replace Turnbull.

The pre-election departures came in response to the ongoing offensive by the most right-wing elements to transform the Coalition into a Trump-style populist and fascistic movement, even if means the breakup of the Coalition in its current form, one of the two key linchpins of capitalist rule since World War II. Presently led by Morrison, these layers are whipping up nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese sentiment as a means of diverting working-class discontent over declining living conditions and ever-greater social inequality.

The most revealing departure was that of Defence Minister Christopher Pyne, who has been a leading powerbroker in the "moderate" faction for 25 years. In addition to heading the multi-billion dollar-a-year military and arms spending portfolio, Pyne is the

government's chief of business in the House of Representatives, orchestrating its legislative agenda and parliamentary tactics.

Desperate to hold the government together, at least for now, Morrison said he would keep Pyne in both posts until the election, adding to a growing list of lame duck ministers.

Pyne has remained an unabashed Turnbull supporter, despite being promoted to the senior defence ministry after throwing his faction's numbers behind Morrison when Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton initially challenged Turnbull's leadership last August. Following the party leadership coup, Pyne told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Turnbull was "the kind of person that should have been prime minister of Australia: urbane, highly intellectual, successful, broad, visionary, clever, articulate, funny, charming, everything that a modern leader and a modern prime minister should be."

Pyne, who was previously defence industry minister, sought to turn his economically blighted home state of South Australia, formerly heavily-dependent on the auto industry, into a naval shipbuilding and war industry hub. Nevertheless, he and Turnbull also advocated trying to convince Washington to avert all-out war, if possible, against China, which takes one-third of Australian capitalism's exports.

The other resignation last weekend was that of Defence Industry Minister Steven Ciobo. Once a Turnbull supporter, he backed last August's leadership coup but lost his own bid to become party deputy leader and was then demoted by Morrison from the high-profile trade ministry. The "conservative" faction had long mistrusted Ciobo, who was regarded as Turnbull's "lieutenant" when Turnbull ousted Tony Abbott, the primary figure in the far-right group, as

prime minister in 2015.

Morrison immediately replaced Ciobo with Senator Linda Reynolds, an ex-army reserve brigadier with close military ties, and declared she would be further promoted to the top job of defence minister if the government won the election. That would be a meteoric rise for Reynolds, who only became a junior assistant minister after Turnbull was removed.

These departures came hard on the heels of a similar announcement by former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who had quit the cabinet last August essentially in protest against Turnbull's axing, that she would be leaving parliament. Bishop, who had been deputy Liberal Party leader since 2007, stood for election as party leader after Turnbull was ousted, but received only 11 votes. It was a rebuff not just for her personally but for the "moderate" faction. In particular, it was a blow to her Western Australian support base, which rests on sectors of the mining industry most reliant on exports to China.

This week, Bishop sent a barbed message to Morrison and his backers, giving a media interview in which she insisted that, as prime minister, she could have won the imminent election.

The latest "retirements" followed those of Industrial Affairs Minister Kelly O'Dwyer, Human Services Minister Michael Keenan and Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion. O'Dwyer had earlier told a Liberal Party room meeting that "crusades" by "ideological warriors" had hijacked the party.

The factional warfare also has engulfed the rural-based National Party, particularly since Turnbull effectively forced its leader, Barnaby Joyce, to quit his post in February 2018. This week, six National parliamentarians stepped up the right-wing aggression by demanding that the government spend billions of dollars to subsidise new coal-fired power stations. This is another move to try to head off support for far-right parties, such as Senator Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation, that have depicted coal-based projects as solutions to high levels of unemployment and under-employment.

The Coalition, a pillar of corporate rule, is being torn asunder. Primarily as a result of the infighting, of the 42 ministers sworn-in when the Coalition took office in 2013 led by Tony Abbott, 26—or more than 60 percent—have either left politics, been dumped from the

frontbench or are planning to leave parliament in May.

The unravelling has accelerated. Nearly 40 percent of Turnbull's post-2016 election ministry has since retired, resigned or are going to quit. Former small business minister Craig Laundy, another "moderate," is also believed to be preparing to announce his departure.

The growing signs of economic reversal, and corporate fears of rising working class unrest, have exacerbated the tensions wracking the Coalition. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial this week warned of "the evident loss in popular trust in institutions, particularly in business in the wake of the banking royal commission." That inquiry, while extremely limited, highlighted the predatory practices of the financial institutions that successive governments have propped up since the 2008 global breakdown.

China's economic slowdown, the simmering US-China trade and technology war, the uncertainty of Brexit, declining real wages and the collapse of Australia's six-year housing market bubble have led already to a "per-capita" recession. Statistics released this week showed that gross domestic product per person dropped 0.2 percent in the December quarter of 2018, the second consecutive quarterly fall.

Under these conditions, sections of the ruling class are once again looking to a pro-business Labor government, backed to the hilt by the trade unions, to stifle and suppress the opposition of workers and young people to the glaring inequality and deteriorating social conditions.

Invited to give a keynote speech to an *Australian Financial Review* business summit this week, Labor leader Bill Shorten pledged to reverse the economic stagnation and "toxic distrust" among workers by slightly lifting minimum wages. "[W]e know employers are not the class enemy," he assured the audience.



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