

Rifts in Australia's ruling coalition engulf rural-based National Party

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The in-fighting tearing apart the city-based Liberal Party within Australia's governing Liberal-National Coalition visibly spread to the regional-based National Party this week.

Despite the Coalition facing a serious defeat at the federal election due by May, factional warfare erupted publicly within the Nationals, laying bare conflicts that go far beyond the current government's electoral prospects.

Former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce, who was ousted early last year, effectively issued a broadside against the Liberals and the government, as well as his successor as Nationals' leader, Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack.

In media interviews, Joyce raised the prospect of terminating the Coalition if he regained the National Party leadership. There was "no law saying the Nationals and Liberals must be together," he declared, describing the Coalition as a "business arrangement, not a marriage." Putting the interests of inner-city Liberals ahead of regional Nationals was "just like political serfdom, we will look after ourselves," he told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio.

Joyce insisted he was the country's "elected deputy prime minister" because he led the party at the last election in 2016, in which the Coalition barely survived with a one-seat majority in parliament's lower house. Later, Joyce pulled back from an immediate confrontation, claiming he would contest the leadership only if there were a party room "spill" against McCormack, who replaced him in February 2018.

Joyce is allied with the "hard right" or conservative wing of the Liberal Party that is waging an offensive to transform the Coalition, one of the two key mainstays of capitalist rule since World War II, into a Donald Trump-style right-wing populist and fascistic movement.

Driving this perspective are two interconnected factors that have immense political implications. One is the

anxiety in the ruling class to divert the mounting discontent in the working class—over ever-more glaring social inequality and declining living conditions—into anti-immigrant, jingoistic, militarist and socially conservative Christian-based directions. These fears have been compounded by signs of economic slump and a global upsurge in working class struggle.

The other factor is the intensifying demands from Washington that whichever party heads the next government, it must continue Australia's unconditional alignment with the US in its escalating economic war and military confrontation with China, Australian capitalism's largest export market and trading partner.

Joyce has a record of railing demagogically against globalisation and big banks, falsely claiming to represent the interests of small farmers and workers in regional areas, and of trying to whip up nationalist and anti-Chinese sentiment. He fully backs Washington's strident stance against Beijing. Last year, he declared that China, not ISIS, was "our security threat."

Joyce and his supporters, particularly members of parliament representing the merged Liberal National Party (LNP) in the northern state of Queensland, are aligned with ex-Liberal Party leader and prime minister Tony Abbott. They opposed Abbott's removal in 2015 by Malcolm Turnbull, the leading figure of the Liberal Party's "moderate" wing. Last August, LNP members helped organise Turnbull's ouster.

The US administration clearly backed Turnbull's removal after he had sought to mend relations with Beijing to try to protect lucrative markets for commodity exporters, universities and educational businesses. Turnbull also had refused to commit the government to joining aggressive US military operations against China in the South China Sea.

Joyce and his backers, who include four senior National Party cabinet ministers, triggered the latest crisis within

the government by raising the demand that it subsidise a new coal-fired power station in north Queensland. But their intervention marks a divide that goes well beyond their support for the coal companies and denial of climate change.

In essence, they are stepping up a drive to refashion the National Party, like the Liberal Party, along far-right lines.

Since Scott Morrison, a member of the “conservative” wing, emerged as prime minister last August, the “hard right” layers around Abbott, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann have gone on the offensive. They have pushed out so-called “moderates” who they did not consider as sufficiently committed to transforming the Coalition.

As a result, just since January, six high-profile cabinet ministers or ex-cabinet ministers have announced their resignations from parliament at the upcoming election: Defence Minister Christopher Pyne, Defence Industry Minister Steven Ciobo, Industrial Affairs Minister Kelly O’Dwyer, Human Services Minister Michael Keenan, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion and former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who had been the party’s deputy leader since 2007.

The “hard right” blitz continued this week, with Bishop, once one of the Liberal Party’s most prominent “moderates,” being replaced in her Western Australian electorate by the “conservative” faction’s nominee, Celia Hammond, a socially conservative former university vice chancellor.

Another “moderate” ex-minister, Craig Laundy, is expected to quit his Sydney seat this week. Morrison is reportedly seeking a prominent right-wing figure to replace him. Laundy last year publicly warned against the Liberal Party relying on a narrow “conservative element” as an electoral base.

At least one media commentator connected to the Liberal Party is pointing to an open split within the organisation. *Australian* columnist Peter van Onselen wrote on March 9: “If Scott Morrison does lose the election—as the polls, betting odds and expectations suggest will happen—the battle over the party’s heart and soul may see the reactionary right wing dominate the debate,” he cautioned.

Within the establishment media, most commentators are also concluding that the fractured Coalition is headed for a serious defeat at the election. Behind the scenes, there is little doubt that the financial and corporate elite are preparing to rely on a Labor Party-led government to

serve its interests and contain mounting working class unrest—as Labor did from 1983 to 1996 under Hawke and Keating, and 2007 to 2013 under Rudd and Gillard.

A March 14 editorial in the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch’s national flagship, assessed that the Liberal-National “partnership is fraying.” It stated: “If it aspires to govern, the undeniable challenge for the Coalition is to reconcile its current differences, stick together and promote policies that are in the national interest. That task may be more difficult than it looks. The forces working against the Coalition are structural, economic, demographic, ideological, and relentless.”

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten this week tried to depict the election as a “referendum on wages,” saying his government would consider asking the Fair Work Commission, the industrial tribunal established by the last Labor government, to institute a minimal “living wage” above the poverty line.

This proposal would seek to head off a rebellion in the working class and help the trade unions subordinate workers to the profit interests of employers, as they have done ever since the “Accords” struck between the unions and the Hawke-Keating government during the 1980s.

Since the 1980s, however, the gap between the obscene wealth of the corporate elite and the deteriorating conditions of working people has widened immensely. The growth of social inequality has only accelerated since the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. According to calculations by *Guardian* economics correspondent Greg Jericho, household incomes have fallen in real terms since March 2015. From mid-2016 alone, corporate profits have risen 43 percent, while wages have risen just 8 percent.

These figures understate the true social polarisation, because they are based on average wage statistics that provide no picture of the gulf between executive salaries and the low pay of increasingly casualised and contract workers.

This class chasm has created the objective conditions for the eruption of bitter class struggle in Australia, as is already taking place in numerous other countries around the world.



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