

Who is Scott Morrison?

Australia's right-wing, US-backed prime minister

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Throughout Australia's recently-concluded federal election campaign, Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought to re-brand himself as an amiable, sports-loving family man. He posed incessantly for photos and videos on sports fields, with his family or with children.

Since the election, the corporate media has lauded him as a political miracle-maker who unified the faction-riddled Liberal-National Coalition and almost single-handedly pulled off an unexpected election victory. Some outlets have dubbed him the "messiah from the Shire," referencing his religious beliefs and his southern Sydney electorate.

In reality, the Coalition only narrowly retained office, and by default. Its vote actually fell, but the opposition Labor Party's fell even more. Aided by preferences from far-right populist parties, the Coalition capitalised on the widespread hostility to the Labor Party, particularly in the working class.

Despite his friendly mask, Morrison is a right-wing, militarist figure. As immigration and border protection minister from 2013 to 2015, he set a global precedent by spearheading "Operation Sovereign Borders" to repel refugees, many of whom had fled the US-led wars in the Middle East. The military operation, devised by Morrison with ex-Iraq war commander Major-General Jim Molan, imposed police-state secrecy about the refugee boat "turnbacks."

Morrison also clearly enjoys the support of Washington, and President Donald Trump in particular. That is because of Morrison's unquestioning commitment to the US military alliance, and its intensifying confrontation with China, as well as his Trump-style nationalist pitches to disaffected voters.

As soon as the election outcome was known, Trump tweeted: "Congratulations to Scott on a GREAT WIN!" Trump rang Morrison to personally congratulate him and, according to the White House, they "reaffirmed the critical importance of the long-standing alliance." This is an ominous warning that Washington will insist on frontline Australian involvement in any conflict with China.

However, far from resolving the rifts that have wracked the Coalition since it regained office in 2013, Morrison's elevation points to the crisis engulfing both the Coalition and the Labor

Party, on which the ruling class has relied during periods of war and economic breakdown to suppress working class opposition.

Morrison clawed his way to the top job via a relatively small breakaway from the "conservative" or "hard right" right-wing faction in the Liberal Party. Misleadingly labelled the "Centre Right," this sub-faction is led by Morrison's ally, junior minister Alex Hawke, a fellow Pentacostal Christian. While it manoeuvres between the "hard right" and the party's supposed "moderate" wings, it rests heavily on the most right-wing elements, whose politics will dominate the government.

Under conditions of a developing slump and the worsening US-China economic war, none of these factions disagree on imposing the burden on the working class and on lining up with Washington's war preparations. But there are sharp tactical differences, above all, over how to deal with the threat of rising working-class unrest, which is already producing an upsurge of strikes and struggles around the world.

As in the US and Europe, the "hard right" faction, now led by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, is seeking to counter and suppress the seething social discontent by refashioning the Coalition into a Trump-style movement. It is competing with a plethora of far-right parties to try to establish a reactionary social base, above all via the promotion of divisive anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-refugee prejudice.

The "moderate" or "socially progressive, fiscally conservative" wing was personified by Turnbull, whom Morrison ousted as prime minister last August. It has sought to cultivate an upper middle class constituency on issues such as same-sex marriage, while pursuing the agenda of the finance elite, including emerging "green industry" entrepreneurs.

These divisions will only intensify, regardless of Morrison's efforts to hold the Coalition government together through the political manoeuvring that has characterised his entire career.

Originally hailing from the affluent eastern suburbs of Sydney (not "the Shire"), Morrison is the son of a police commander who became a municipal mayor. At an early age, Morrison became an adherent of an evangelical Pentacostal mega-church that forms part of the "prosperity gospel" Hillsong movement, which glorifies the acquisition of wealth.

The doctrinal statement of its parent body insists that people who have not accepted Jesus Christ are “depraved” and “consigned to everlasting punishment.”

Morrison had a meteoric rise through the corporate and political elite. After graduating from university, at the age of just 21 Morrison became national policy and research manager for the Property Council of Australia, a peak body of developers and finance houses. He served those powerful real estate-related interests for six years, from 1989 to 1995. Then, still in his 20s, he was appointed Australian Tourism Task Force deputy chief executive, in charge of devising multi-million dollar advertising campaigns.

These big business connections helped him become the New South Wales state director of the Liberal Party from 2000 to 2004. Still only in his early 30s, he oversaw the party’s 2001 federal election campaign, which was notorious for the bipartisan demonising of asylum seekers, who were detained in virtual concentration camps on remote Pacific islands.

Morrison’s pre-selection for a parliamentary seat in 2007 was marked by bitter factional infighting which, even within the Liberal Party, marked him as a ruthless opportunist. In the party ballot, Morrison was initially trounced, 82 votes to 8, by a right-wing faction candidate. However, damaging allegations, which later proved to be false, appeared in Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, resulting in the candidate’s disendorsement.

Within a year of entering parliament Morrison became shadow housing minister, and just a year later, in 2009, the Coalition’s immigration spokesman, giving him shadow cabinet status. In 2010, according to well-substantiated media reports, Morrison urged a Coalition shadow cabinet meeting to whip up fears about “Muslim immigration” as a political weapon. It was a signal of the reactionary role he was to play in vilifying and incarcerating refugees once the Coalition regained office in 2013.

On the back of “Operation Sovereign Borders,” Morrison was promoted by “hard right” Prime Minister Tony Abbott to become social services minister. He slashed welfare spending, including by striking a deal with the Greens to increase means and assets tests on aged pensions, estimated to strip entitlements from one million retirees within a decade.

In 2015, Morrison’s sub-faction backed the ousting of Abbott and the installation of Turnbull, even though Morrison duplicitously remained publicly loyal to Abbott. Immediately promoted to treasurer as the result of a deal with Turnbull, Morrison set about further cutting social spending and pushing through massive corporate tax cuts. He proposed increasing the Goods and Services Tax in order to shift the tax burden further onto the working class and poor, but Turnbull abandoned the plan, fearing an electoral disaster.

As treasurer, Morrison also provocatively waved a lump of coal in parliament to show his contempt for climate change concerns and demonstrate his support for the mining companies. He opposed the legalisation of same-sex marriage,

sought to prevent a royal commission inquiry into the predatory practices of the banks, and rejected calls to increase pitiful unemployment benefits.

Last August, Morrison’s “Centre Right” faction again played a pivotal role in removing Turnbull. This cleared the way for Morrison to suddenly emerge as the “compromise candidate” to become prime minister, rather than Peter Dutton. Once more, Morrison professed support for the incumbent, Turnbull, only to replace him the next day.

One of the Morrison government’s first acts, last August, was to deny the courageous US whistleblower Chelsea Manning a visa to address what were expected to be large audiences in Australia. This was a direct attack on democratic rights and freedom of speech, and another signal of Morrison’s total backing for Washington.

That was underscored following the April 2019 arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Morrison refused pointblank to defend Assange, an Australian citizen, saying “it has got nothing to do with” Australia, because “it is a matter for the US.”

Likewise, Morrison followed in Trump’s footsteps last October by announcing that Australia would review moving its Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognising Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

After an Australian fascist massacred Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, Morrison denied any link to the demonising of refugees by himself and the political establishment as a whole. Within days of the atrocity, he sought to further stoke anti-immigrant sentiment by announcing a 15 percent cut in the annual migration intake, falsely blaming immigrants for “congestion” in Australian cities.

Despite the media glorification of Morrison, his government is an extremely fragile one. It will have to follow Washington’s increasingly belligerent anti-China policy and preparations for war, in the face of widespread anti-war sentiment. Moreover, with the economy sliding into recession, the corporate elite is already demanding that the Coalition step up the offensive against workers’ conditions and basic social services, which will inevitably trigger explosive working class struggles.



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