

Australian political establishment once again in turmoil

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Just a day before parliament was due to resume for the year, mayhem erupted throughout Australia's political order yesterday, with the leaders of three parties suddenly either stepping down or being challenged by factional rivals.

Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale stunned his colleagues by resigning yesterday morning, effective immediately, in the midst of the country's ongoing bushfire and climate change disaster. Barnaby Joyce, the populist ex-leader of the rural-based National Party, launched a bid to oust the party's leader, Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack. Bob Katter, who heads one of the smaller right-wing rivals of the National Party, announced he was handing over to his son Robbie.

In this morning's vote by the Nationals' 21-member parliamentary party room, McCormack barely survived as Nationals leader. They did not release a vote count. Whatever the margin, the party is split and Joyce's bid will continue to destabilise the party and the Liberal-National Coalition government.

Meeting at the same time, the Greens' 10 parliamentarians quickly installed co-deputy leader Adam Bandt unopposed as leader, brushing aside calls from some party members for a membership ballot. Senators Larissa Waters and Nick McKim were elected as Bandt's co-deputies, narrowly beating two rivals, also pointing to ongoing rifts.

The turmoil is a symptom of an intractable political crisis. After years of bitter experiences at the hands of successive Labor and Coalition governments, public trust in the parliamentary establishment had already fallen to a record low, even before the political fallout from the current government's contemptible response to the ongoing bushfire and climate change disaster.

The hostility toward the government has been compounded by its blatant cover-up of the sports grants pork-barrelling scandal, and its draconian entry ban on all non-citizens who have been in China, which is severely affecting the lives of thousands of residents and students on the pretext of stemming the spread of the coronavirus.

Economists are predicting that the combined economic

impact of the bushfires and the coronavirus outbreak is likely to cause a recession in Australia, especially due to the impact on mining exports to China and the multi-billion dollar revenues derived from Chinese students and tourists.

An economic slump will intensify the political unrest already generated by rising under-employment, falling wages, worsening living conditions and growing social inequality. It will also shatter the government's claim, issued last year, that it has produced a budget surplus as demanded by the financial markets.

The split in the National Party underscores the fragility of its coalition with the Liberals. Joyce, who was ousted by the party's agribusiness interests as the Nationals' leader two years ago via allegations of sexual misconduct, is calling for the party to distance itself from the Liberals, currently headed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. "We've got to make sure that we are not a shadow of another party," he said in announcing his leadership challenge yesterday.

Joyce also declared that the Nationals' support base was "being attacked on all sides," notably by Senator Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation and another right-wing rural populist formation, the Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party. These nationalist parties have cynically exploited the worsening hardship among rural and regional farmers and workers caused by the Coalition's pro-big business program.

If successful, Joyce would have issued the Liberals with new policy demands, forcing a reworking of the coalition agreement. His loss is still expected to pave the way for another challenge, guaranteeing that the instability will continue.

Adding to the volatility, Resources Minister Senator Matt Canavan quit his cabinet post to back Joyce. Canavan, like Joyce, is associated with the most right-wing faction in the Coalition and advocates more corporate coal mining and land clearing. His departure will force Morrison into a more disruptive cabinet reshuffle than the one already required to replace deputy National Party leader Senator Bridget McKenzie, whom Morrison forced to resign on Sunday as

the scapegoat for the sports grants rorting scandal.

For now, McKenzie's deputy party leadership has gone to Drought Minister David Littleproud, who also aspires to replace McCormack.

Even more politically revealing was Di Natale's abrupt resignation after leading the Greens for five years. He claimed he wanted to spend more time with his family yet admitted that was "one of the biggest clichés in politics." His departure, coming just as Australia's bushfire catastrophe highlights the global environmental crisis created by capitalism, underscores the bankruptcy of the Greens' claims that pressure within the corporate-dominated parliamentary order can lead to policies that stem global warming.

Di Natale's central perspective—of forming a coalition government with the Labor Party—was dashed by last May's federal election, in which Labor's vote fell to a century low. When he was installed as Greens leader in 2015, he claimed the party could double its primary vote to 20 percent in a decade. Instead its vote has stagnated at around 10 percent, and is mostly concentrated in affluent inner-city electorates, despite the falling support for both Labor and the Coalition.

In announcing his resignation, Di Natale still insisted that Australia would have to get used to "power-sharing parliaments" featuring the Greens because of the erosion of support for the two traditional ruling parties. He boasted of what he said the Greens delivered in its last formal alliance with Labor, which propped up the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013. Among the proudest achievements he cited was the Labor-Greens carbon pricing scheme, which actually saw emissions rise.

New leader Bandt, who once professed to be a socialist, is identified with the party's supposed "left" wing, which has anxiously sought to appeal to the growing protests over global warming involving large numbers of school students.

Yesterday's *Australian Financial Review* editorial gave an insight into the fears and frustration gripping the corporate ruling class over the political turbulence, which has seen six prime ministers, along with dozens of ministers and state premiers, come and go since 2007. Referring to the Coalition's unexpected and narrow win in last year's election, it stated: "The hope had been the political miracle of last May would end the instability that has plagued Australia for a decade."

Less than nine months since the election, however, the hopes of the ruling elite for a stable government that could fully impose the brutal demands of the financial markets on the working class has been dashed. This will only intensify the drive to develop more authoritarian forms of rule to suppress the discontent.

Morrison, who rests on the Liberal Party's most right-

wing factions, ousted Malcolm Turnbull, from the party's supposed "moderate" wing, as prime minister in August 2018. Morrison, who set about trying to refashion the Coalition into a Donald Trump-style populist movement in order to divert and suppress the rising popular discontent, is now thoroughly discredited. He may soon face a leadership challenge himself.

At the same time, the Labor Party, led by Anthony Albanese, is doing everything it can to divert rising disaffection back into the straitjacket of the parliamentary framework. Far from calling for the government's removal, Labor is constantly offering advice to Morrison on how to stem public outrage, including by sacking McKenzie over the sports grants affair.

Since being installed as Labor leader after last year's election debacle, Albanese has sought to woo big business with promises to form a government that would enhance "wealth creation" and initiate a new wave of profit-driven economic restructuring. He repeatedly invokes as his inspiration the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, which, with the collaboration of the trade unions, carried out a historic assault on wages and working conditions while cutting corporate and income taxes, privatising state assets and deregulating the financial system.

The entire Labor and union apparatus is committed to defending the financial and corporate ruling class, which means inflicting even greater attacks on the working class as global capitalism plunges into economic breakdown, trade wars, climate and disease-related disasters and potentially catastrophic military confrontations.



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