

# Right-wing defection intensifies Australian government instability

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A vehement right-wing defender of Donald Trump quit the ruling Liberal Party yesterday, further destabilising the Liberal-National Coalition government and marking another push for the creation of a Trump-style fascistic movement in Australia.

Liberal Party backbencher Craig Kelly theatrically resigned from the party at a parliamentary caucus meeting, reportedly giving Prime Minister Scott Morrison no notice. Kelly said he defected in order to have the freedom to speak out in favour of using ivermectin, an anti-parasite drug, and hydroxychloroquine, a malaria medication, as coronavirus treatments—mimicking Trump’s anti-scientific claims.

Kelly’s move, however, is part of a wider political agenda. For months, he has backed Trump’s claims of a stolen US election used to justify the January 6 coup attempt at the Capitol in Washington. He has mirrored Trump and US far-right groups in agitating for the scrapping of all COVID-19 safety restrictions in line with the demands of big business for a fully re-opened economy to ensure corporate profit.

In the most immediate sense, Kelly’s defection robs the Morrison government of a working majority in parliament, cutting its numbers to 76 in the 151-member House of Representatives. One of its votes is held by the House Speaker, who has only a casting vote. Kelly said he would continue to support the government in no-confidence motions, but warned that he was open to opposing other government measures.

A rather stunned Morrison tried to present an image of calm, declaring that his government would continue as before in dealing with “the worst situation we’ve seen since the Second World War.” Yet he immediately underscored the government’s knife-edge situation by holding a meeting with another right-wing

parliamentarian, Bob Katter, to discuss a deal on confidence motions.

Behind all these machinations are fears in ruling circles of a breakout of mounting working class discontent, the potential for which can be seen in the determined struggle of Coles warehouse workers against a protracted company lockout in Sydney. That prospect is rising amid the looming abolition of subsidies for the unemployed and underemployed through the JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes put in place after the pandemic erupted last March.

Kelly’s move will be used to both try to further foment a far-right movement and push the increasingly unstable Morrison government to ramp up its efforts to suppress popular opposition to the corporate restructuring offensive and the lifting of pandemic public health restrictions.

The timing of Kelly’s resignation is revealing. First, it came just two days after Morrison personally took one of the country’s first vaccine injections and used the nationally-televised event to insist that the arrival of vaccines meant an end to any need for lockdowns, border closures or other COVID-19 restrictions. Kelly’s advocacy of quackery and other anti-vaccine responses became incompatible with the government’s desperate PR campaign to present vaccines as a silver bullet to end the danger of infection and secure a full return to physical workplaces.

Second, Kelly’s defection followed last Saturday’s staging of so-called Millions March Against Mandatory COVID Vaccination rallies—attended by a few thousand people. They were led by far-right groups that oppose vaccinations and depict COVID-19 as a corporate-state conspiracy. The banners featured messages such as “coronavirus is a scam” and “vaccines kill.” This is the Trump-style constituency that Kelly and others are

trying to build on.

As with the US Republican Party, the Liberal-National Coalition in Australia has become an incubator of far-right elements that are seeking to exploit the historic economic and social crisis produced by the failure of the official response to the global pandemic. Other far right Coalition members, notably George Christensen, have been associated with Kelly, and former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce held talks with Kelly after his defection, reportedly seeking to recruit him to the rural-based Nationals.

Following his resignation, Kelly was also visited by Malcolm Roberts, a senator representing Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation, and Katter, who heads his own nationalist Katter's Australia Party. These various formations are all trying to divert the rising political disaffection into reactionary chauvinist directions, while falsely posturing as opponents of big business.

In 2017, following Trump's presidential election victory of 2016, another right-wing Liberal, Cory Bernardi, quit the government and sought to emulate Trump. But his Australian Conservatives party floundered after Morrison replaced his deposed predecessor Malcolm Turnbull in August 2018 and shifted the Coalition into alignment with Trump.

The political establishment has become increasingly unstable over the past decade, with one prime minister after another being deposed or defeated at the polls. This is the second time that Morrison's government has lost its parliamentary majority. The previous occasion came just after Morrison grabbed the leadership in a Liberal Party room coup. When Turnbull quit parliament, the government lost his seat in a by-election, and a pro-Turnbull MP, Julia Banks, defected to the crossbench.

Morrison only survived the May 2019 election, despite suffering a negative swing, because the Labor Party's vote fell to historic lows, especially in working class electorates, due to widespread disgust and hostility at its own long pro-business record.

The installation of Morrison himself represented a turn toward Trump-style right-wing populism, with Morrison enjoying the support of elements such as Kelly. Morrison rescued Kelly from party pre-selection defeat in 2019 and aligned with Kelly and Christensen in refusing to condemn Trump's incitement of the

January 6 insurrection plot. For weeks, Morrison and his senior ministers insisted that Kelly and Christensen were "entitled to their views," thereby giving credence to their promotion of positions associated with the fascistic right.

Now, as well as the Kelly defection, Morrison's government is being destabilised by a widening media scandal over an alleged rape and other alleged sexual assaults on female ministerial staff members. The precise political agenda behind this affair, which rests on untested accusations, is not yet clear. Yet it also plays into frustrations in the ruling class with the government's perceived failure to aggressively end COVID-19 restrictions and pursue "industrial relations reform" to further attack working class conditions.

Monday's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* provided a flavour of this corporate agitation. It denounced "medieval lockdowns and populist state border closures." Such COVID-19 measures had to be "a thing of the past," as demanded by Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott.

Likewise, the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly today complained that the Morrison government had not done enough to counter what he called the "pandemic protectionism," such as limited lockdowns and border closures, to which some state premiers had resorted in order to appease "popular sentiment" in favour of safety.

Kelly concluded by warning that no medical data yet existed that vaccines would halt coronavirus transmission, as the public demands. He ended his column on an ominous note for the government and the entire political establishment: "You get the message—2021 is loaded with uncertainties."

These developments are a warning that, far from being an exception to the breakdown of democratic norms in the US and internationally, the ruling class in Australia is also turning toward authoritarian forms of rule, directed against mounting social and political opposition from the working class.



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