

Australian government under siege as sexual assault allegations escalate

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Ever-widening allegations of rape involving government ministers or staff members are being used to destabilise the already faction-wracked Liberal-National Coalition government.

Very quickly, over the past two weeks, these accusations have been brought forward to throw a question mark over the future of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his government, with corporate media outlets describing the resulting political crisis as an “existential” one for the government.

Morrison, who has been in office for just two-and-a-half years, could become the latest in a string of prime ministers who have lost office since 2007, pointing to the underlying instability of the political establishment.

By the start of last week, former Liberal Party ministerial staff member Brittany Higgins had been joined by three other women in making allegations against an unnamed former male colleague; three of sexual assault and one of sexual harassment.

By the end of the week, the accusations had been extended to an alleged 1988 rape committed by an unnamed government cabinet minister against an anonymous woman who reportedly committed suicide last year.

Today, after days of media speculation and pressure, Attorney-General and Workplace Relations Minister Christian Porter named himself as the accused minister. Porter declared his innocence of the allegations and refused to resign or stand aside, but said he would, with Morrison’s support, take a period of leave to improve his mental health. That is unlikely to end the campaign against the government.

If Porter were to quit the government or parliament, the government would lose its parliamentary majority, possibly triggering its fall. Last week, it lost its working majority on the floor of the House of Representatives when Craig Kelly, a vehement Donald Trump supporter, resigned from the Liberal Party.

Morrison had unsuccessfully tried to bury the initial accusations by Higgins by announcing several investigations, including into “workplace culture” inside

parliament house. One of the inquiries, being conducted by his own department chief, is deciding whether Morrison misled parliament in stating that he was not aware of the Higgins case until it was reported in the media.

Liberal Party Senator Sarah Henderson also referred to the Australian Federal Police a complaint she said she had received about a historic sexual allegation relating to a Labor Party shadow minister.

When assessing such sex scandals it is always essential to bear in mind that they have historically been utilised to execute political shifts.

At the same time, basic legal and democratic principles, including the presumption of innocence and due process, have been ditched in a squalid media frenzy, without an ounce of political principle involved, let alone clear political differences.

Many unanswered questions exist about the allegations and the forces arranging their release to the media. Untested accusations that have been known and circulating in political circles for some time are being published, creating a virtual trial by media.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull asserts that he and his wife Lucy were sent the allegations in 2019. Labor Party foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, among others, received them last week through anonymous letters sent to their offices.

There is a large measure of political diversion involved in this affair, which is occurring amid a mounting social and political crisis, intensified by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

For days on end, the corporate media has been dominated by belated accusations of sexual assaults against young women, not the fact that on March 31 the government will throw more than a million workers into potential unemployment by ending its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme, and cast another 1.6 million unemployed workers into dire poverty by scrapping the “Coronavirus Supplement” on JobSeeker dole payments.

At the same time, the corporate elite is escalating its

pressure on the government and the opposition Labor Party, which controls most state and territory governments, to end all pandemic restrictions and accelerate the cutting of the wages and conditions of the working class.

The government's industrial relations bill, produced after months of closed-door talks with the employers and trade unions, has fallen far short of what big business has demanded to smash up workers' conditions. And its COVID-19 vaccine program is becoming a debacle, with just 25,000 jabs in the first week—less than half the target. The government is failing to match its pledges to inoculate the population by October, and thus undermining its efforts to present vaccines as a “silver bullet” to fully reopen the economy for the sake of corporate profit.

There is acute awareness in the ruling class that the discontent in the working class over the destruction of jobs and conditions, and rising social inequality, could erupt, as seen in the more than three-month fight by 350 Coles warehouse workers in Sydney against the company's lockout and its plans to close their facility at the cost of their jobs.

The rape allegations have become one means by which Morrison and Labor leader Anthony Albanese, whose own position is precarious, are each being put on notice to more aggressively implement the corporate agenda or face removal.

Today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial demanded that the minister “stand up and reveal himself” to put an end to the “paralysis in Canberra.” Notably also, Murdoch media outlets, which have previously supported Morrison, have been in the forefront of the campaign, alongside the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Turnbull, who was ousted in August 2018, allowing Morrison to seize the prime minister's post, has been particularly prominent. Yesterday, he demanded that the cabinet minister, identified today as Porter, “out” himself, and that Morrison stand him aside. He went further, insinuating that the alleged rape victim might not have committed suicide, and therefore could have been murdered.

Whatever the motives of all the individuals involved in these allegations, Turnbull's high-profile intervention points to bitter conflicts engulfing the Coalition and the entire political establishment. Turnbull represents elements of the financial elite that exploit identity politics to present themselves as “socially progressive,” as against the more Trump-style right-wing populism of Morrison.

Trump personally welcomed Morrison's installation as prime minister in 2018, and Morrison identified himself with Trump politically, to the point of refusing to condemn Trump's incitement of the fascist coup bid in Washington on January 6. Now there may be moves to replace Morrison

with someone better able to work with the Biden administration as it intensifies the US confrontation with China, Australian capitalism's biggest export market.

Certainly, the hand of Washington was seen in Turnbull's removal, as it was in the 2010 backroom Labor Party coup that ousted Kevin Rudd. Both Turnbull and Rudd were fully committed to the US military alliance but had expressed concerns about the prospect of a war against China.

These tensions further demonstrate the underlying weakness and vulnerability of the Australian ruling class as the pandemic-accelerated global economic crisis worsens and the US-China conflict deepens.

As it has throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Labor Party is continuing to prop up the Coalition government, offering it “constructive” support on every major front—from the formation of a bipartisan national cabinet to the October budget, which handed the corporations and the wealthy massive tax cuts, the cutting of JobSeeker unemployment payments back to \$44 a day and the escalating demonisation of China.

Albanese's response to the rape allegations has been to warn the government that unless Morrison stood down the accused minister, there would be “very much a dark cloud over the parliament and over the cabinet.”

Whatever the immediate outcome of the crisis, its function, and the aim of all of the official parties, is to refashion the parliamentary set-up, so as to implement the austerity agenda and war plans of the ruling elite, and to suppress the mass discontent that is building up within the working class.



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