

Crisis-wracked Australian PM unveils cabinet reshuffle

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Confronted by deepening political turmoil, with his government being destabilised by wave after wave of sexual assault or misconduct allegations, Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday desperately reshuffled his cabinet in a bid for survival.

After days of mounting media speculation predicting the changes, Morrison announced that, as flagged, Christian Porter would be dumped as attorney-general and industrial relations minister, along with Linda Reynolds as defence minister, although both would remain in cabinet.

Significantly, Peter Dutton, who was Morrison's right-wing rival for the leadership when they ousted Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in 2018, will become defence minister, a post he has long coveted. An equally right-wing and anti-working class figure, Michaelia Cash, will be promoted into the twin roles of attorney-general and industrial relations minister.

In a bid to shore up his own factional position, Morrison elevated one of his closest supporters, Stuart Robert, to a new super-portfolio of employment, workforce, skills, small and family business despite a series of previous scandals that saw him forced to resign from the ministry in 2016. As an indication of the domestic agenda, Robert is notorious for defending the government's "robo-debt" scheme that unlawfully stripped more than \$1 billion from welfare recipients.

Morrison could not afford to sack anyone from cabinet for fear that they would quit parliament and leave his Liberal-National Coalition government without a parliamentary majority. The government already lost its working majority on the floor of the House of Representatives last month when far-right Trump supporter Craig Kelly resigned from the Liberal Party.

As a measure of the crisis engulfing the government, yesterday's announcement came just four months after another cabinet reshuffle, in which Morrison had emphasised "stability and consistency." Morrison yesterday again claimed that his changes would ensure "stability and continuity" but with a "shake up" and a fresh "gender

equality lens."

A "new cabinet taskforce" would focus on "women's equality and safety," headed by Foreign Minister Marise Payne, whom Morrison labelled "effectively the prime minister for women."

Almost exclusively, the media has presented the government's unravelling as a product of Morrison's mishandling of the sexual assault allegations made against members of the government. Porter has been accused of raping a young female friend three decades ago and Reynolds has been accused of indifference toward a staff member who was allegedly raped by a colleague inside parliament house in 2019.

As has happened many times historically, such allegations are being used, whatever the intentions of those immediately involved, for underlying political purposes. Information long held within the Liberal Party and other ruling circles has been leaked or seized upon, including by figures such as Turnbull and Peta Credlin, who was chief of staff to Turnbull's ousted predecessor Tony Abbott.

In the style of a MeToo witch hunt, unproven and untested allegations have been given headline treatment, overturning the presumption of innocence. Under the guise of a belatedly discovered concern for women who suffer sexual harassment or assault, reactionary political agendas are being pursued by elements within the ruling capitalist class and affluent sections of the upper middle class.

While certainly promoting the prospects of privileged women within the parliamentary and corporate elite, the campaign has served as a political distraction and as a thrust for a more right-wing and militarist course on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts.

Largely buried from public discussion is the impact of the government's termination this week of the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme and the JobSeeker dole payment "coronavirus supplement." Millions more workers and small business people face impoverishment, and this will fuel explosive social and political discontent.

Also hidden from view are the implications of the Biden

administration's rapid ratcheting up of the US conflict with China, which places the Australian population on the frontline of a potentially devastating economic and military war.

It is hardly a coincidence that the cabinet reshuffle centres on the two key portfolios of industrial relations and defence. These are crucial for intensifying the offensive against the jobs and conditions of the working class and stepping up the preparations for a US-led military confrontation with China.

The two demoted ministers, Porter and Reynolds, were both on the frontline of the government's failure to deliver the escalating demands of the corporate and strategic establishment.

Porter had presided over the almost complete collapse of the government's industrial relations bill, which ended up this month falling far short of the full restructuring of working conditions demanded by big business, despite months of backroom talks last year to strike a mutually beneficial deal with the trade union leaders. Porter had proclaimed Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus his BFF (Best Friend Forever) after the union agreed to a wholesale ripping up of workers' wages and conditions when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, but the government proved incapable of carrying through the total assault required by the corporate boardrooms.

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* on March 22 castigated Morrison for having previously suggested that a "Hawke-Keating-sized reform agenda" was needed but then failing to seize on the pandemic crisis to "achieve any significant incentive-sharpening micro-economic reform."

More than that, the editorial said there had been "a profound political failure by the Coalition side of politics to craft the narrative and build a constituency for workplace reform," since it regained office in 2013. The Coalition had made no effort to paint what Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating had called "the big picture" of the supposed benefits for workers of "globally competitive enterprises."

These references to the Hawke-Keating agenda and its "big picture" recall how their Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 worked closely with the unions to impose a sweeping assault on workers' jobs, conditions and basic rights that earlier Coalition governments had been unable to implement.

Reynolds had been under fire from within the military establishment for delays and gaps in the acquisition of new weapons and for failing to sufficiently bury the exposure of the war crimes committed by Australian forces in Afghanistan.

In a column on March 25, the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who is closely connected with the US

military and intelligence apparatus, insisted that the recent warning issued by a US admiral of a military conflict over Taiwan within six years would necessarily involve Australia in a war for which it was not prepared.

"We have what will be the world's 12 most powerful conventional submarines on order," Sheridan wrote scathingly. "They are a good investment. But they don't start arriving until 2034. Our new frigates are also delayed..."

"Our lack of size and lack of stockpile mean we have no war-fighting ability... We should move very fast in the next few years on fast jets, missiles and unmanned submarines... We need many, many, many more missiles."

Sheridan called for up to \$40 billion to be spent on such weaponry over the next few years, on top of the more than \$200 billion that the Coalition government has allocated over the next decade. "That's what the government should concentrate on," he pointedly concluded.

Morrison has shown he is fully committed to backing Washington's aggression against China, but there may well be concerns in the Biden administration about his close personal and political ties to Trump, as well as his capacity to mobilise the country for war.

This week, the opposition Labor Party will hold a two-day online platform conference, making its pitch, backed by the trade unions, to satisfy the ruling elite's requirements for both austerity and war preparations.

While seeking to differentiate itself from the Coalition by making an even greater focus on gender issues, Labor's draft platform pledges a fiscal policy that "keeps spending to a responsible level," support for "a diverse and dynamic business sector" and greater "workplace collaboration" between business and unions. It also vows to strengthen "the US Alliance" because of "its vital importance to Australia's national security requirements and the United States' long-term role in underpinning broader stability in our region."



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