

Ousting of National Party leader highlights political instability in Australia

Mike Head
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Yesterday's sudden, apparently largely unanticipated, deposing of the deputy prime minister and National Party leader Michael McCormack has pointed to an accelerating fracturing of Australia's parliamentary establishment.

No figures were released but reportedly by just 12 votes to 9, National Party members of parliament opted to return Barnaby Joyce to those posts from which he had been ousted in February 2018.

The narrow margin is a sign of unresolved rifts in the rural-based party, and the Liberal-National Coalition government as a whole. In the short-term, Agriculture Minister David Littleproud will stay as the Nationals' deputy leader. He voted for McCormack but then chose not to run after a spill motion was called and may seek to displace Joyce in the months ahead.

Joyce's "resurrection" has the potential to further destabilise the Coalition government, which has been shaken by one crisis after another in recent months, not least the worsening debacle of the COVID-19 vaccine operation, which has opened the door to a resurgence of the pandemic.

Even as the National MPs were meeting behind closed doors in the parliament building, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was convening an "emergency" meeting of the bipartisan National Cabinet with state and territory government leaders over the vaccine crisis.

Joyce's revival is a clear blow to Morrison and his authority within the government. Having just returned from the G7 summit in Britain, Morrison was still in quarantine in the official prime ministerial residence as the Nationals "spilled" McCormack, with whom Morrison has worked closely.

The corporate media has largely depicted Joyce's return in terms of opposition by coal mining industry-related factions of the National Party to Morrison's efforts to push the Coalition toward accepting the goal of zero net carbon emissions by 2050, as now demanded by the Biden administration in the US as well as the European capitalist powers.

Driving the Coalition infighting, however, are wider and

deeper conflicts, bound up with growing popular political disaffection, soaring social inequality and the escalating US offensive against China.

Joyce is a right-wing populist, backed by the most far-right elements within the National Party. Decades of corporate economic restructuring, accompanied by the dismantling of former national-based protectionist measures such as collective marketing schemes, have shattered the National Party's former base among family farmers. Tens of thousands have been driven from the land to make way for agribusiness conglomerates.

Joyce has a record of railing demagogically against globalisation and big banks, falsely claiming to represent the interests of small farmers and workers in regional areas, and of trying to whip up nationalist and anti-Chinese sentiment. He fully backs Washington's strident stance against Beijing, having previously branded China "our security threat" and agitated against Chinese investments in Australian-based agribusinesses. In 2019, Joyce succeeded in securing a Morrison government ban on a takeover by a Chinese company of the country's largest milk processor, Lion Dairy and Drinks.

In the most immediate sense, Joyce's comeback means the Coalition agreement with the Liberal Party, led by Morrison, must be renegotiated, with Joyce likely to demand stronger representation in the cabinet and more explicit backing for the coal mining industry.

Just over two years ago, in March 2019, during a previous bid to retake the leadership, Joyce raised the prospect of terminating the Coalition if he succeeded. There was "no law saying the Nationals and Liberals must be together," he declared. Putting the interests of inner-city Liberals ahead of regional Nationals was "just like political serfdom, we will look after ourselves," he told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio.

For now, it seems that Morrison and Joyce will seek to patch up the Coalition, although it may be days before a new partnership agreement and ministerial line-up is adopted.

There is dismay in the government and the big business

media. Today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial voiced alarm over the "running body count of party leaders." The *Australian*, a Murdoch flag-bearer, said McCormick's removal was "an unwelcome reminder of the revolving-door syndrome in which deposed leaders destabilise a party as they plot their return."

The Morrison-Joyce combination would be the eighth change of leadership since the Coalition took office in 2013. The departure of previous National Party leaders and the deposing of prime ministers Tony Abbott in 2015 and Malcolm Turnbull in 2018 came on top of the ousting of four prime ministers from 2007 to 2013—John Howard, Kevin Rudd (twice) and Julia Gillard.

In 2018, figures within the National Party's most big business-aligned factions, such as former party leader John Anderson, teamed up with Turnbull to force Joyce to resign from the leadership, supposedly because of an extra-marital affair and sexual assault allegations. But that was a mask for the underlying fissures wracking the Coalition.

Joyce's "resurrection" marks a revival of attempts by the most right-wing elements within the Coalition to turn it into a more Trump-style movement to divert growing social unrest in nationalist, anti-Chinese directions, amid more signs from recent state elections of collapsing support for both the major ruling parties: Labor and the Coalition.

Joyce has been a strong backer of the coal industry, including a potential government-financed coal-fired power station in central Queensland, advocated by one of his supporters, Senator Matt Canavan.

Many corporate interests, however, including in agribusiness, are now investing in carbon "farming" and trading schemes as profitable means of exploiting the schemes being introduced by the major powers internationally in the name of addressing climate change.

Key business groups, among them the National Farmers Federation and Business Council of Australia, support the Australian government signing on to the net zero 2050 emissions target at November's United Nations Climate Change Conference in Scotland. They fear the imposition of "carbon tariffs" by US and European governments on the pretext of upholding the target.

From that standpoint, the *Australian Financial Review* denounced the Nationals' decision to "rehabilitate a destructive climate populist as its leader." It would undercut "the confidence of capital markets and investors" in funding gas projects and other supposed "decarbonisation" ventures.

Asked yesterday about his threat as a backbencher to cross the floor of parliament to vote against a net zero 2050 target, Joyce defiantly said he would seek the "best deal for regional" local jobs and industry, "as opposed to a Danish one or a German one."

On China, Joyce said the Nationals had been right to call for tougher foreign investment laws, "when everyone was calling us bigots and rednecks." He added: "Now they just call us correct."

Driving this political crisis are two related factors, both intensified by the global pandemic. One is the anxiety in the ruling class to divert the mounting discontent in the working class—over ever-more glaring social inequality and declining living conditions—into anti-immigrant, jingoistic and militarist directions. These fears are compounded by signs of a global upsurge in working-class struggle.

The other factor is the stepped-up demands from the Biden administration for Australia's unconditional alignment with the US in its economic and military confrontation with China, Australian capitalism's largest export market, despite widespread popular opposition to war and US militarism.

In response to the convulsion in the government, the Labor Party has stepped up its pitch to the financial elite, outlined at Labor's recent national conference, that it is the party best able to govern in periods of social unrest and war.

Party leader Anthony Albanese said the Nationals' leadership shift showed the government was being "self-indulgent" at a time of national crisis, whereas he was "focused on the needs of the Australian people." Albanese said he would welcome an early election to "end this circus."

Working closely with the trade unions, the Labor leaders are talking up the prospect of an early election in order to try to corral working-class discontent back behind the election of yet another big business Labor government, like those of Hawke and Keating, and Rudd and Gillard.



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