

Right-wing Coalition breaks apart in crisis of Australia's two-party system

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With extraordinary rapidity, the Coalition, the opposition in the federal parliament, broke apart today with its leaders publicly hurling mutual recriminations at one another.

The immediate trigger of the rupture was a dispute between the erstwhile Coalition partners, the Liberals and the Nationals, over whether to back anti-democratic legislation introduced to parliament by the Labor government on Tuesday.

The divisions, however, run deeper and the break-up of the Coalition is not a conjunctural development. Instead, it is the sharpest expression of a crisis of the entire parliamentary set-up, under conditions of mounting popular discontent and the collapse of any stable, mass base of the old parties of capitalist rule.

The Coalition has been in place for almost the entire post-World War II period. Together with the Labor Party, it has been one of the two mainstays of the two-party system. Amid a massive social polarisation over the past forty years, the broad, middle-class base of the Liberals—the urban component of the Coalition—has collapsed.

That longer-term erosion was expressed in the May 2025 election, when the Liberals suffered their worst result in history, retaining just nine out of 88 metropolitan seats across the country.

Since then, the rump Coalition has only just held together, with Liberal leader Sussan Ley widely viewed as a lame duck. Elements of the Coalition have peeled off to One Nation and other far-right outfits, amid attempts by segments of the ruling class to cultivate a right-wing populist or even fascistic movement to capture discontent and serve as a mechanism for deeper authoritarianism.

Those issues were at play in the conflicts within the Coalition over Labor's legislation. Labor, acting on behalf of the ruling class, has exploited the December 14 Bondi atrocity to accelerate attempts to ban mass opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, and to institute police-state measures.

It recalled parliament a fortnight early at the beginning of this week, in a bid to pass some of the most authoritarian legislation in decades. Both Liberal leader Ley and National head David Littleproud had publicly demanded that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urgently convene parliament to press ahead with the crackdown on civil liberties after Bondi.

But when he did, divisions were exposed. Together, both elements of the Coalition opposed expanded racial vilification offenses. Fraudulently presented by Labor as a bid to combat "hate speech," the legislation potentially criminalised political speech, including strident denunciations of Israel or any other power.

The opposition of the Coalition had nothing to do with the sweeping implications of such measures for democratic rights. Instead, it was fearful that the broad character of the legislation could capture its own racist dog-whistling and attacks on immigrants, refugees, Indigenous people and other minorities. The Coalition had thus called for more targeted measures, particularly directed against Muslims and opponents of the genocide.

That basic reality has been covered up by the corporate media, which has obfuscated the reasons for the Coalition's opposition. The fear is that the Coalition's effective defence of racism exposes the hypocrisy of the official discussion on "hate speech," and the extent to which genuine xenophobia is being promoted from above.

Without the numbers to pass the racial vilification laws through parliament, Labor shelved them and split what had been an omnibus bill. It introduced two main pieces of legislation to parliament on Tuesday.

Tightened gun control measures were opposed by the entire Coalition, but passed with the backing of the Greens. The controversy within the Coalition hinged on laws that provide the Home Affairs Minister with extraordinary powers to ban "hate groups," not on the basis of any criminal actions, but because of their political speech.

The Coalition party room decided to back that police-state measure. But three National MPs in the shadow cabinet crossed the floor and voted against it in parliament. Again, their opposition had nothing to do with civil liberties. It expressed the fact that elements of the Coalition, including the Nationals, have ties to fascistic and anti-immigrant forces.

The decision of the MPs to cross the floor was a breach of shadow cabinet solidarity. It was effectively a move to split the Coalition, given that the agreement between the Liberals and the Nationals is meaningless if they vote as they please on legislation.

Ley responded by calling a meeting yesterday. There was no contrition from the Nationals MPs, and they were backed by Littleproud. With Ley being pushed to take disciplinary measures, all eight Nationals MP in the shadow cabinet quit this morning. Speaking shortly after, Littleproud declared that the Coalition was over.

“Our Coalition has become untenable,” Littleproud told the media. He launched a broadside against Ley, declaring that she “has put protecting her own leadership ahead of maintaining the Coalition.” It was “time for the Liberal Party to work out who they are and what they are.”

The Liberal leadership of the Coalition has always been premised on its ability to win a sufficient number of urban seats for the two-party outfit to form government. With its wipeout at the May 2025 election, the basis for that political authority no longer exists.

More fundamentally, as Littleproud’s comments indicated, the Liberal Party is being torn apart. In successive elections, since 2019, it has lost formerly safe blue-ribbon seats to Teal independents, who combine pro-business policies with genuflections to environmental concerns. So-called moderate Liberals have increasingly lost their seats to the Teals and been sidelined, while hard-right forces have grown more prominent.

Ley’s leadership has been based on a desperate attempt to hold the various factions and sub-factions together. But that has become increasingly untenable.

The Nationals have, since the election, played a role in attempting to push the Coalition further to the right.

The Coalition’s defeat was bound up, not with popular support for Labor, but with a mass repudiation of the Liberal-National’s association with the fascistic US President Donald Trump. In the immediate wake of the election debacle, the Nationals demanded that the Coalition maintain a policy of developing a domestic nuclear power industry, one of the Trumpian elements of its election campaign.

When Ley refused, the Coalition collapsed, only to be patched back together in an uneasy truce a fortnight later.

Then in November, the Nationals unilaterally announced they were ditching the Coalition’s previous commitment of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. That forced Ley’s hand, with the Liberals being compelled to announce that they were also abandoning net-zero. The net-zero target was always a fraud, unaccompanied by the necessary steps to achieve it or alleviate the climate crisis. But its abandonment was intended as a marker of a shift to the right and was directed against those “moderates” who remained within the Liberal Party.

One element of the crisis is that not only is the Liberal Party imploding, but together with the Nationals it is losing support to the far-right One Nation. That was most sharply expressed in November, when former Nationals leader and previous Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce defected from the Coalition to join One Nation. Joyce has declared there are a number of other

National MPs considering a similar move.

The latest Newspoll, released on Monday, showed that One Nation’s primary vote had eclipsed that of the Coalition for the first time in history. Combined, the Liberal-Nationals were at a record low of 21 percent, while the right-wing populist outfit was at 22 percent. Labor’s polling was at its lowest level since the election, of 32 percent.

The figures are one indication of a break-up of the old two-party system. That has vast implications, not only for the erstwhile Coalition, but for the Labor Party and capitalist rule itself.

Pointing to that, Albanese at the beginning of the week made a public plea for the two-party system to be defended and strengthened. One Nation, he said, “appeal to grievance and they appeal to division. They’re a divisive force... I don’t want to see One Nation with a higher vote than the Coalition.”

“I think that the parties of government and alternative government, which change of course in Australia over time, have served our nation pretty well [and] our political system, compared with what we see overseas,” Albanese declared.

Albanese’s fear is not the right-wing program advanced by One Nation. His own government is relentlessly scapegoating immigrants for a social crisis caused by its own pro-business policies. It is slandering opposition to the genocide as antisemitism and cracking down on democratic rights. And it is committed to the alliance with American imperialism under the leadership of the fascist Trump. On all of these issues, Labor and One Nation are effectively in agreement.

Albanese’s lament is instead over the crisis of a two-party system that has been central to maintaining capitalist rule. Without a viable opposition, the Labor Party alone is responsible for implementing a ruling-class agenda of war, austerity and authoritarianism, without the safety valve of curated divisions and theatre within parliament. It is tasked with imposing those inherently unpopular measures, moreover, under conditions where Labor’s own base in the working class has collapsed.

The crisis of the two-party set-up presages major social and political struggles, which will pit an increasingly radicalised working class against the moth-eaten parliamentary establishment and the profit system itself. The critical issue is transforming the opposition that exists into an organised, mass movement of the working class fighting for socialism.



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