

Liberal leadership spill underscores Australian political crisis

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The fracturing of the opposition Liberal-National Coalition in Australia continued yesterday when the Liberal Party's shrunken number of parliamentary representatives voted by 34 votes to 17 to depose party leader Sussan Ley, from the Liberals' centre right faction, and replace her with Angus Taylor, a figurehead of the party's right wing.

This marks another desperate lurch to the right to try to divert the growing discontent over falling living standards, widening social inequality and government attacks on dissent and basic democratic rights under the Albanese Labor government into nationalist and anti-immigrant scapegoating.

Taylor's installation highlights the deepening breakup of the parliamentary establishment as a whole. In the most immediate sense, it is a bid by the Liberals, one of the mainstays of capitalist rule in Australia since World War II, to stave off political oblivion. At his media conference yesterday, flanked by six Australian flags, Taylor said: "If an election was held today, our party may not exist by the end of it."

Taylor alluded to the historic character of the political crisis. "The Liberal Party is at the worst position it has been since 1944, when the party was formed," he said. The big business party was able to base itself on small business and other middle-class layers during the post-war boom, but that base has been shattered by the stark growth of oligarchic billionaire wealth at the expense of the rest of the population.

Taylor's elevation followed a February 5-8 Newspan conducted by the Murdoch media that showed the Coalition's vote plunging to 18 percent—about half its vote at last May's federal election. Support for the anti-immigrant One Nation, which postures as an anti-establishment opponent of the widely-reviled two-party system, rose to 27 percent—more than four times its May election vote of 6.4 percent.

Despite the disintegration of the Coalition vote, there was no rise for Labor, however. Its vote remained at about the historically low level of 33 percent that it obtained last year, further pointing to the breakup of the decades-old two-party system. Labor won the May 2025 election by default, securing an electoral landslide by falsely presenting itself as an alternative to the Coalition's Trump-like policies of slashing social spending and public sector jobs.

Ley had tried to hold the Coalition together since the crushing

election defeat, which reduced its numbers of lower house seats in urban areas—which represent two-thirds of the population—to nine out of 88. Her efforts over the past nine months to paper over the rifts between the rump "moderate" wing of the Liberals and the right-wing failed dismally, however.

These rifts will only be exacerbated by Ley's declaration, straight after her ouster, that she will resign from parliament, triggering a by-election for her regional electorate of Farrer, which the Liberals may well lose, further decimating their numbers.

Taylor was shadow treasurer under former opposition leader Peter Dutton, who lost his own seat in last May's electoral wipeout. Not only is Taylor tarnished by his backing for Dutton, who echoed many of Trump's policies. At his media conference he made clear his intent to seek to rescue the Liberals by matching the anti-immigrant poison of Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation, trying to blame immigrant workers for the intensifying cost-of-living and housing crisis.

Taylor vowed to cut immigration numbers, without nominating a figure, saying he would unveil a new policy as a priority within weeks, supposedly to "protect the Australian way of life."

This will further alienate many people in the major cities, where more than half the population have parents born overseas. Doing its own best to outflank One Nation, Albanese government has already cut net migration to 306,000 in 2024–25, down from 429,000 the year before.

Echoing the rhetoric of One Nation, Taylor declared: "Our borders have been opened to people who hate our way of life, people who don't want to embrace Australia and want Australia to change for them... if someone doesn't subscribe to our core beliefs, the door must be shut."

Like Hanson, Taylor sought to blame immigrants for the December 14 terrorist shootings by alleged Islamic State gunmen at Sydney's Bondi Beach. "We've had the worst terrorist attack on our soil in our history, by Islamic extremists," he stated.

Senator Jane Hume, who worked alongside Taylor as shadow finance minister under Dutton, was elected as Liberal deputy leader by 30 votes to 20 for Ley's deputy Ted O'Brien. She is also identified with Trump-style policies. During the May 2025

election campaign, she unveiled a policy to force public servants to work from the office, despite continuing COVID infections, and claimed that Labor's campaign might have "Chinese spies" handing out how-to-vote cards.

Ex-Coalition prime minister Tony Abbott, who lost his seat on Sydney's affluent north shore in 2019, was promoted on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" television show last night, endorsing Taylor as "the best person for the job."

Abbott praised One Nation and advocated a return to the "White Australia" policy that was maintained on a bipartisan basis until the 1970s. "Every country has a right to keep its character," he insisted. "Our character is essentially Anglo-Celtic and Judaeo-Christian. That's what has made our country attractive to migrants, and we should keep it that way. I quite liked the way our immigration policy was run in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, where there was an expectation on integration from day one and ultimately assimilation."

At his media conference, Taylor also promised to cut government spending, scrap the Labor government's limited "net zero" carbon emissions policies, end childcare subsidies and "properly fund" the military. Previously, as Ley's shadow defence minister, Taylor backed the demands of the Trump administration for increased military spending and advocated an explicit commitment to the military defence of Taiwan against China.

Taylor's installation, however, is hardly likely to stem the disintegration of the Liberals. Like Ley, he will be trying to placate the party's "moderate" wing, many of whose MPs have lost their former Liberal heartland seats to Teal independents, while facing continuing agitation from more strident figures, led by Andrew Hastie and Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who advocate a Trump-style agenda of right-wing populism.

Many of the rural-based Nationals are also pushing in that direction to head off One Nation, having already quit the Coalition twice during Ley's brief tenure.

An editorial in today's *Australian*, the national Murdoch flag-bearer, anxiously backed Taylor's bid to "lead Liberals' existential battle." It welcomed his calls for cutting social spending while boosting the military, and his anti-immigrant rhetoric. But it concluded nervously by saying, "we wish him well" in reversing the Liberals' collapse and enabling it to "survive as an alternative government."

The editorial primarily reiterated the intensifying drumbeat in the corporate media for much deeper austerity and much greater military spending from the Labor government, urging Taylor to do campaign on that basis.

The Albanese government has already inflicted the biggest reversal to working-class living standards in history. That is now being deepened by resurging inflation and rising home loan interest rates. Labor is also channelling One Nation by cutting immigration and international student numbers, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other preparations for a US-led war against China.

There is an increasing parallel with the political crises in the US, the UK and European countries. In the UK, the Labour government of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, elected in July 2024 solely on the basis of mass hostility to the Conservative Party, is imposing sweeping austerity and a rapid militarisation, provoking widespread opposition.

The Conservative Party, the traditional alternative government, has effectively been supplanted by Nigel Farage's Reform, which is being promoted by sections of the ruling elite to shift politics even further to the right, making a reactionary, anti-immigrant pitch to social discontent.

In Australia too, Labor's previous working-class base has disintegrated after decades of serving big business, making it increasingly difficult for its associated trade union bureaucracy to suppress the struggles of workers. Powerful sections of the ruling elite, including the country's wealthiest individual, mining magnate Gina Rinehart, are seeking to cultivate a Trump or Farage-style formation to divert and suppress the discontent.

For now, the ruling capitalist class depends on Labor to implement its requirements. This means intensifying the assault on working and living conditions, accompanied by an offensive against basic democratic rights, as seen in the violent police attacks on anti-genocide demonstrators in Sydney this week.

There is no answer for the working class within this entire reactionary and rotting establishment. A mass socialist movement must be built, against all the parliamentary parties, to defeat the capitalist program of war, austerity and authoritarianism.



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