

Far-right Nationals leadership switch highlights Australian political crisis

Mike Head
15 March 2026

The rightward lurch and splintering of the opposition Liberal-National Coalition in Australia intensified last Wednesday. The rump Nationals group of 18 parliamentarians voted quickly—in less than 24 hours—to install their most hard-right figure, Senator Matt Canavan, as their new leader to replace David Littleproud who had suddenly quit in tears on Tuesday.

No information was released about the numbers who voted for Canavan, but he defeated two more traditional right-wing candidates, Senator Bridget McKenzie and Nationals deputy leader Kevin Hogan. This is a sharp shift. When Canavan sought the Nationals' leadership after the Coalition's crushing defeat in the May 2025 federal election, he reportedly obtained only seven votes.

Most immediately, this represents another desperate attempt by the rural-based Nationals, and the Coalition as a whole, to try to head off growing media polling support for the anti-immigrant One Nation of Senator Pauline Hanson, which threatens the survival of nearly all the Nationals in parliament.

This is part of a wider political crisis. Hanson's organisation is exploiting the deepening popular disaffection with the entire political establishment under conditions of a worsening cost-of-living crisis, now accelerated by the price impacts of the escalating criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

Canavan's elevation is the second Coalition leadership spill in a month. It came just four weeks after the February 13 vote by the Liberal Party's shrunken number of parliamentary representatives, by 34 votes to 17, to depose short-lived party leader Sussan Ley, from the Liberals' centre-right faction, and replace her with Angus Taylor, a figurehead of the party's right wing.

At his first media conference as party leader, Canavan immediately sought to outdo Hanson's nationalism. He proclaimed a demagogic "hyper-Australia" vision focused on "more Australian farming, more Australian manufacturing, more Australian jobs" and "more Australian everything," including more "Australian babies."

Canavan accused Hanson and One Nation of being divisive because of a recent Islamophobic statement by Hanson that she knew of no "good" Muslims. At the same time, he continues to back the broader blaming of immigrants and international students for soaring housing prices and inflation by advocating even deeper cuts to immigration than those already made by the Labor government.

A minister in the previous Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison until 2020, Canavan has been the most vocal agitator in the Nationals to push the Coalition for a more aggressive, Trump-style agenda. That includes outspoken support for the coal industry, abandonment of carbon emissions targets, rejection of COVID pandemic vaccine mandates, vehement opposition to same-sex

marriage and backing for legislation to criminally prosecute doctors performing abortions.

Among other things, Canavan has called for an Elon Musk and Trump-style department of government efficiency to slash social spending, the abolition of the Department of Climate Change and withdrawal from even the token 2015 Paris Agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. He has claimed there is no scientific evidence linking climate change to extreme weather events such as floods and record high temperatures.

The two Coalition leadership switches mark a further lurch to the right within the political establishment to try to divert growing working-class discontent over falling living standards, widening social inequality and government attacks on dissent and basic democratic rights under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government into nationalist and anti-immigrant scapegoating.

Yet, Canavan's elevation will exacerbate the conflicts raging inside the Coalition since its 2025 election debacle, which left it with only 9 out of 88 lower house seats in urban areas—which represent two-thirds of the population. Widely perceived as pushing a Trump-like agenda, the Liberals received their lowest vote since the party was founded in 1944.

Canavan's agitation goes beyond that espoused by Taylor, let alone the Liberal Party's "moderate" faction that is simultaneously trying to stem the shattering of their urban base and win back former traditional Liberal seats now held by "Teal" independents.

Littleproud's resignation reportedly came as a surprise to his colleagues. The Nationals' leader since 2022, he had only recently survived another leadership challenge by Canavan and others. Littleproud's departure is a telling indication of the ongoing fallout from the collapse of support for the Coalition, in both its former middle-class urban base and its rural and regional electorates.

Littleproud cited the Coalition's May 2025 defeat as the major factor in his decision to quit, which he explained only on the basis that he felt "buggered" and lacking the energy and commitment to remain leader. Since the election, he had precipitated two splits with the Liberals, helping to scuttle Ley's brief post-election tenure as Liberal leader, yet he was under rising pressure from the Canavan camp to go further.

In fact, Canavan and his backers had been instrumental in triggering those splits. That was most visible in the second one, when Canavan and other Nationals defied Littleproud to vote in parliament on January 20 against the Albanese government's "hate group" banning laws, which the Nationals' shadow ministers had agreed to support as part of the Coalition.

These laws, introduced on the fraudulent pretext of responding to

the December 14 Bondi Beach terrorist attack by ISIS-linked gunmen, create the framework for criminalising anti-war and oppositional organisations, particularly those that oppose the US-backed Israeli genocide in Palestine.

Canavan and three shadow cabinet Nationals MPs crossed the floor and voted against it, deliberately provoking the split. The Nationals MPs were not opposed to the attack on democratic rights. They were aligning with far-right forces that are fearful their own racist rhetoric could fall foul of the sweeping new laws.

Canavan was originally a protégé of former Nationals leader and two-time deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce, who defected to One Nation in December. Canavan, previously an economist at the pro-big business Productivity Commission and a senior executive at KPMG, a global corporate consulting giant, became Joyce's chief of staff from 2010 to 2013 before obtaining a Senate seat for himself.

Canavan and his supporters are seeking to win back Nationals voters who are expressing support for One Nation out of disgust and disillusionment with the political establishment. Recent polls indicated voting support for One Nation as high as 28 percent, while support for the Coalition fell to less than 20 percent and Labor's dropped below 30 percent, down from the 34 percent it received at the 2025 election.

Canavan's ascension has been generally welcomed by the corporate media in the hope of reviving the fortunes of the Coalition, a mainstay of capitalist rule, together with Labor, since World War II. A March 12 editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* ludicrously declared: "New Nationals leader Matt Canavan, 45, has the conviction, energy, gravitas and pithy communication skills to add much-needed policy and political strength to the Coalition."

However, there is concern in the ruling class about Canavan on a number of fronts.

One is that a few days before becoming the Nationals leader, Canavan opposed the US and Israeli attack on Iran, describing it on Sky News as "America's regime change war." He said: "I'm not exactly sure what the case here for military action is. It's a very, very serious thing to do," he said.

Canavan compared the assault to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, warning that the world had already seen the consequences of that. He also said the claim that Iran had nuclear weapons had been made about Iraq in the early 2000s, only to prove to be false.

His posture was a mixture of Australian nationalism—advocating military self-sufficiency—concern about the unpopularity of the war and alignment with elements of Trump's own "Make American Great Again" movement that oppose lengthy and potentially disastrous military interventions.

When pressed on Sky News last week about his stance now that he was the Nationals leader, Canavan attempted to backtrack, saying: "The actions that the United States take in the Middle East are a matter for the United States." He said he hoped the war ended quickly, as Trump had promised. "I hope it ends in victory like Donald Trump wants," he said.

Canavan said his role had changed since becoming leader of the Nationals. "I've got a different job now... I'm the leader of the National Party, and I'll support the Coalition policy." Nevertheless, his comments put him at odds with Taylor, who told Sky News he would be open to providing stronger military support than the Labor government to the US and Israel if he were prime minister.

The greatest anxiety in ruling circles is whether Canavan can actually save the Nationals and the Coalition. In his opening media conference as party leader, Canavan's main charge against Hanson

was that in her nearly three decades in politics she had not delivered a "single dam, single road, single hospital." Yet, One Nation's polling reflects its pitch to the growing anti-establishment sentiment, and a desire among respondents to strike a blow against the political order, rather than positive support for One Nation's policies.

The latest Resolve Political Monitor survey published in the Nine media outlets today reported that voting support for Labor and Coalition has fallen below 50 percent—a far cry from the 80 percent combined vote they secured from the 1950s to the 1980s.

According to the survey, the soaring cost of living was voters' No.1 worry—43 percent of respondents to the poll nominated that as their primary concern. Only 20 percent thought things would improve in the next 12 months, while 51 percent thought they would get worse.

This points to the underlying political crisis. Labor won the 2025 election by associating the Coalition with a Trump-like agenda of sweeping cuts to social spending, yet its big-business program has already inflicted the biggest reversal to working-class living standards in history.

That is now being deepened by the war-driven soaring fuel prices, resurging inflation and rising home loan interest rates. Labor is also ramping up its commitment to the war and the US military by sending forces to join the assault on Iran, while allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS and other preparations for a US-led war against China.

For now, given the Coalition turmoil, the ruling capitalist class depends on Labor and its associated trade union apparatuses more than ever 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 last month.

The critical issue for the working class is to consciously break politically from the entire decaying establishment. A mass socialist movement must be built, in opposition to Labor, the Liberals, Nationals, One Nation and all the parliamentary parties. That is the only way to defeat the capitalist program of war, austerity and police-state authoritarianism.



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