

Australian government threatens a “double dissolution” election

By Mike Head
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Facing intense pressures on his government, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday triggered a move for a rare “double dissolution” election of all members of both houses of parliament. He called a sudden media conference to declare that such an election would be held on July 2 if the Senate again refused to pass a bill directed against construction workers.

Via a constitutional power not exercised since 1977, Turnbull secured a proclamation by the Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove—the formal head of state and the Queen’s representative—to prorogue (terminate) the current session of parliament and recall it on April 18. Turnbull also called forward the date of the annual federal budget from May 10 to May 3.

By these manoeuvres, Turnbull presented an ultimatum to the Senate to pass the draconian Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) Bill during a three-week parliamentary session before May 11. That is the last date on which Turnbull can constitutionally ask the governor-general to grant a double dissolution election, which can be triggered only if the Senate has twice rejected a bill.

Turnbull’s unannounced visit to Government House early yesterday morning to obtain the governor-general’s approval for parliament’s prorogation was his second such trip in three days. Last Friday, he rushed to secure formal royal assent to the passage of laws changing the system of voting for the Senate, which had been just rammed through a marathon overnight parliament sitting.

The Greens struck a deal with the government to pass these laws, which are designed to clear out of the Senate eight minor party and independent senators who have blocked some of the government’s budget austerity measures. Mostly right-wing populists, these

senators have opposed provisions such as upfront fees to see doctors, cuts to welfare benefits and steep rises in university fees, in a bid to secure their own political survival amid widespread popular opposition to the austerity offensive.

The government has seized upon the Senate’s refusal, up until now, to pass the ABCC Bill as a pretext to try to break through a profound political crisis that has increasingly engulfed the government and the parliamentary system itself, and proceed with an agenda that has been largely hidden from public view.

Six months after deposing his predecessor Tony Abbott as the leader of the Liberal-National Coalition government in a party room coup last September, Turnbull has been under mounting fire from the corporate elite for failing, just as Abbott did, to impose deep cuts to social spending, business taxes and workers’ wages and conditions. These demands have escalated amid a worsening deterioration of the economic situation due to the collapse of the 20-year mining boom, the sharp downturn in China and the deepening impact of the global financial breakdown that erupted in 2008.

While serving as a constitutional trigger, the ABCC Bill also provides a warning of the wider big business agenda that is being pursued. While nominally directed against the construction unions, the legislation is targeted against the working class. It would reinstate the ABCC with sweeping coercive powers to jail construction workers for refusing to answer its questions about alleged unlawful industrial action. The bill is aimed at intimidating and suppressing resistance by building workers to an escalating assault on jobs and conditions.

Turnbull has also come under growing pressure from

Washington to prove his unconditional commitment to its military “pivot to Asia” to confront China and assert unchallenged US hegemony over the Indo-Pacific. Until now, Turnbull’s government has not dispatched Australian warships and planes to join Washington’s provocative “freedom of navigation” exercises in Chinese-claimed areas of the South China Sea. In recent weeks, both Abbott and the Labor Party have publicly called for such Australian deployments, ratcheting up the pressure on Turnbull.

Turnbull’s government has been under further criticism from the Obama administration for permitting the lease to a Chinese company of the commercial port of Darwin—a strategic location near military bases from which US forces can operate against China. Yesterday, the *New York Times* highlighted Washington’s discontent. It published a front-page article, headlined, “US Casts Wary Eye on Australian Port Leased by Chinese,” which emphasised the American government’s concern that China’s “port access could facilitate intelligence collection on US and Australian military forces stationed nearby.”

As the *New York Times* article noted, the conflict over the strategic port embodies a profound dilemma confronting Australia’s ruling elite. It is under escalating demand from Washington—on which it depends militarily—to take a frontline position in a confrontation with China—its largest export market.

The twin pressures on Australia’s political establishment—economic and foreign policy—have produced growing instability since the landslide defeat of the Howard Coalition government in 2007, which saw Prime Minister John Howard lose his own seat in parliament. Since then, not one prime minister has served a full term. Three of them, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Abbott, were ousted via backroom plots, carried out behind the backs of the population.

By his double dissolution threat, Turnbull hopes to pave the way for a frontal attack on working-class conditions and to shore up his own position against those in the political and military establishment, including Abbott and his backers, who advocate a more aggressive role in Washington’s confrontations with both China and Russia.

Big business representatives and the corporate media hailed yesterday’s move by Turnbull as a political masterstroke. “Malcolm Turnbull grabs the initiative,”

declared *Australian Financial Review*. It insisted that the “transformation” of Australia’s economy from the resources boom required the slashing of labour costs and “now-unaffordable spending expectations”—that is, basic social services.

Murdoch’s *Australian* editorial welcomed Turnbull’s “bold plan to give shape to his agenda.” However, it also voiced concerns that both Turnbull and Labor Party leader Bill Shorten had not been “tested in the heat of an election campaign before.” Turnbull’s government still needed to “unveil a plan that is both palatable to the electorate and committed to fiscal repair—twin aims that the Coalition has not been able to satisfy in either of its first two budgets.”

These comments point to the other dilemma confronting the ruling elite: how to impose the program of austerity and war on the population, which is hostile to the intensifying attacks on social conditions, disaffected from the major parliamentary parties and concerned by the increasingly visible threat of a military conflict with China.

Under these conditions, by striking their pact with the government on the Senate voting laws, the Greens sent a wider signal of their readiness to try to stabilise the political establishment by working with the Coalition. At the same time, Turnbull’s involvement of the governor-general, who holds broad anti-democratic powers under the Australian constitution, demonstrates the readiness of the ruling elite to resort to authoritarian measures to impose its agenda on the working class.

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