

Australian prime minister's London speech highlights political turmoil

By Mike Head
14 July 2017

During a visit to Europe this week for the G8 summit in Hamburg, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull gave a speech in London that caused consternation in Australia's media and political establishment because it exacerbated the rifts in his fractured government.

Turnbull's July 10 speech was an obvious bid to rebuke his predecessor Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull ousted in September 2015. The occasion was Turnbull's acceptance of the Disraeli Prize from a right-wing think tank, Policy Exchange, in honour of the 19th century British Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.

Turnbull used the event to insist that the Liberal Party, which he currently leads, represents a marriage of liberalism and conservatism, and not just the socially conservative wing identified with Abbott, who increasingly has been attacking Turnbull's leadership.

Turnbull's European trip came amid rising popular hostility toward the Liberal-National Coalition government that has for four years sought to slash social spending and working conditions, deepening the offensive launched by the previous Labor government.

This opposition has only grown since the government barely survived last July's election, which Turnbull called in an unsuccessful bid to break through the parliamentary impasse caused by the widespread resistance to the austerity program.

Yet Turnbull is also facing mounting criticism by the corporate ruling class for failing to carry through the full assault that he promised to deliver when he ousted Abbott. This is aggravating fissures in the Coalition, intensified by Abbott's efforts to muster support among the most openly right-wing Liberal Party elements for a challenge to Turnbull.

Two weeks ago, Abbott issued a "Make Australia Work Again" manifesto, echoing Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric, setting out an authoritarian blueprint for suppressing working-class

resistance. Abbott's proposals include abolishing the powers of the Senate to block legislation, gutting public spending, cutting immigration and deploying the military for domestic repression.

With an eye to Washington's agenda, Abbott also added military policy to his campaign against Turnbull, calling for the acquisition of US nuclear-powered submarines and for the government to follow the Pentagon in sending Australian ships and planes into the 12-mile territorial zones around Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

Turnbull's speech outlined his bid to outdo Abbott, not just in supporting the US alliance but in repelling refugees and boosting the powers and resources of the police-intelligence apparatus.

His address was ironically titled "In Defence of a Free Society." He argued that the labels of conservative and liberal "have lost almost all meaning," except—in a swipe at Abbott—when they were "appropriated, often cynically, by one politician or another as it suits their purpose."

The convergence between the two strands of the Liberal Party, Turnbull said rested on standing for "freedom," which now meant bolstering "security." He cited the phrase "the paradox of freedom" coined by the anti-communist political philosopher Karl Popper. Turnbull quoted a passage from Popper demanding "that the state should limit freedom to a certain extent."

Turnbull asserted that "security and freedom" were not opposites. Rather, "freedom" depended on "security" and therefore must be subordinated to it. The crucial question, he declared, was "what security is required to enable our freedom."

Concretely, this meant, first of all, keeping Australia's borders shut to all refugee boats. According to Turnbull, "weak borders fragment social cohesion, drain public revenue [and] raise community concerns about national security."

In reality, unknown numbers of boats have sunk and asylum seekers have perished as a result of the military's "Operation Sovereign Borders." Hundreds of refugees remain incarcerated in offshore detention camps. This brutality inflicted on innocent refugees fleeing wars, starvation and persecution is also a warning of the repressive methods being prepared against the working class as a whole.

Turnbull proposed that the "Australian experience" offered "the seeds of a potential solution" for Europe, as it "grapples today with unsustainable inflows of migrants and asylum seekers."

Western governments are already turning to the Australian model as a means of scapegoating refugees and whipping up nationalism as a diversion from escalating social inequality and discontent. In presenting the Disraeli Prize to Turnbull, British Home Secretary Amber Rudd actually praised him for "doing so much to promote immigration and integration."

Turnbull likewise declared his government is playing a leading role in fighting Islamic terrorism, which he called the greatest threat to "freedom." He boasted of heading a push at the G8 summit for draconian state controls over social media.

Turnbull called for measures to force online service providers, like Facebook, Google and Twitter, to take down "extremist material" and compel encrypted messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram or Signal to unlock their codes.

Earlier, at a joint media conference with his British counterpart Theresa May, whose government also hangs on a knife-edge, Turnbull extolled the "tough" laws his government has introduced, supposedly to fight Islamic State and other terrorists. He also reiterated his statements at the G8 summit, backing the Trump administration's military threats against North Korea and demands on China to cripple Pyongyang's economy.

In an editorial, while voicing support for Turnbull's "security" initiatives, the *Australian* castigated Turnbull for having "only fanned the flames of disunity" by drilling down into the Liberal Party's "ideological schism."

Perhaps unwittingly, Turnbull pointed to the deeper historical forces tearing apart the Liberal Party. He claimed the authority of former Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who adopted the label "Liberal" in founding the party in 1944 in order to appeal to small business and other middle-class layers, whom Menzies dubbed "the forgotten people."

"Menzies sought a lesser role for government in citizens' lives than Labor did, but by our 21st century standards he was hardly an economic liberal," Turnbull noted. "He believed in a highly regulated economy with high tariffs, a fixed exchange rate, centralised wage fixing and generally much more government involvement in the economy than we would be comfortable with.

"Of course he was not alone—his UK and even American counterparts had similar views. It was a different age."

The globalisation of production over the past four decades has shattered the entire framework of nationally regulated economies and the reformist political parties based upon them, including Australia's Liberal and Labor parties. An enormous social divide has opened up between a small wealthy elite and the vast majority of the population, including most of the "forgotten people" of the "middle."

During his trip, Turnbull tried to revive the claim he made, when ousting Abbott, that he would provide the optimistic "economic narrative" that Abbott lacked, as means of drumming up public support for the agenda of austerity and militarism.

"We've got our skates on and we're getting things done, getting the initiative, the momentum going on all of these matters," he stated at a UK media conference. At the same time, speaking in one of world capitalism's biggest financial centres, he pledged to step up his efforts to cut corporate taxes.

"We're inspired by some of your reforms—and particularly your reduction in company tax," he told May at their joint media event. "You're already at 19 percent, you said, and heading to 17. We've made some progress in that direction but we've got a way to catch up."

To match British standards would mean almost halving the current company tax rate in Australia. This drive to satisfy the dictates of global finance capital epitomises the new "age." It means dismantling welfare, housing, public healthcare and education, and preparing a police-state apparatus to confront the inevitable resistance of the working class.

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