

Tensions continues to wrack Australian government after by-election defeat

By Mike Head
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Shockwaves from the record swing against the Liberal-National Coalition government in last Saturday's by-election in the inner-Sydney seat of Wentworth are intensifying the conflicts that are destabilising not just the ruling parties but the political establishment as whole.

For only the second time since World War II, Australia is set to have a minority government. The last one, the Gillard-Rudd Labor government, survived from 2010 to 2013 with the support of the Greens and some independents before it was swept from office in a general election landslide.

The underlying volatility goes far beyond the immediate fallout from the Wentworth by-election. Increasingly, the parliamentary set-up in Australia, as in other countries, is being torn asunder by the tensions being generated by widening social inequality, the prospect of another financial breakdown and the aggressive "America First" program of the Trump administration, which is stoking conflict with China and Russia.

The result in Wentworth is another indication of the deepening popular hostility toward all the major parties. Successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, have enriched the financial elite while imposing far-reaching cuts to healthcare, education and welfare, attacking basic democratic rights and stepping up Australian involvement in US-led wars and military preparations for conflict with China.

Not only did the Coalition lose a third of its vote in Wentworth, but so did Labor and the Greens. As a result, an independent took the seat, adding to an array of 16 "independents" or "other party" politicians in the House of Representatives and Senate.

While postal votes are still being counted, it seems almost certain that the Liberal Party has lost the seat

that it or its conservative predecessors have held since the electorate was established in 1901. At the latest count, Kerry Phelps, an independent, will have 51.1 percent of the vote after the allocation of preferences from Labor, the Greens and other candidates.

Despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government now holding only 74 seats in the 150-member House of Representatives, the Coalition is seeking to remain in office by securing pledges from various independents not to back no-confidence motions. The Labor Party is assisting the government, and striving to stabilise the parliamentary order, by indicating its opposition to forcing a general election before the next one is due in May.

Labor leader Bill Shorten and his shadow cabinet ministers this week ruled out initial suggestions that Labor would push for an early election. Tony Burke, manager of opposition business in the House of Representatives, played down the prospect of a no-confidence motion. "We want to see a Shorten Labor government be elected at a general election. That's what we want to see," he said.

How long the government can hold on, however, is far from clear. The huge defeat in Wentworth, which was held by Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted via an internal Liberal Party coup on August 24, has inflamed the rifts in both the Liberal and National parties that led to Turnbull's removal.

The most right-wing Liberal Party faction, centred on ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, has blamed Turnbull for the loss, because he quit the seat after being deposed and refused to publicly support the party's candidate. Yesterday, Abbott went further, criticising Morrison's decision to invite Turnbull to head a delegation to an environmental conference in Bali.

Morrison, himself a member of the right-wing faction, is trying to hold the Liberal Party together by seeking to placate the “moderate” wing around Turnbull while implementing the policies of the Abbott-Dutton wing. “This is not about going one way or the other way, to the left or the right,” he declared after the Wentworth loss. “We are in the sensible centre right of Australian politics.”

Adding to the government’s fragility, however, virtually open warfare has erupted in the rural-based National Party. Former leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, who is allied with Abbott, is clearly pushing to return as party leader, at the expense of his replacement Michael McCormack, who was backed by Turnbull.

Morrison has underscored the lurch to the right contained in Turnbull’s ouster by doubling down on the Coalition’s anti-refugee policies and its support for coal-fired power stations, as well as its commitment to Washington’s confrontation with China. Morrison and Dutton this week reversed Morrison’s indication last week that the government could allow some refugees detained on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island to be resettled in New Zealand, provided they were barred from ever entering Australia.

Like Trump and far-right governments and movements in Europe, the government’s “hard right” faction is trying to whip up a socially conservative and xenophobic base, and divert the mounting discontent in the working class along reactionary anti-immigrant, nationalist and protectionist lines.

There is concern in some ruling circles, however, that this pitch could unleash social and class tensions and further destabilise the political system, particularly under conditions of global economic, geo-strategic and political instability.

In an opinion column on Wednesday, the *Australian’s* editor-at-large Paul Kelly warned of the break-up of the Liberal Party, which has been one of the central pillars of capitalist politics in Australia since the last world war.

More broadly, the government’s defeat in Wentworth, coming on top of another collapse of its vote in a recent by-election in the northern Brisbane seat of Longman, pointed to a “rising tribalisation of Australian politics and culture” as “the shared compact that binds Australia together begins to disintegrate.”

Similar fears were reflected by former foreign minister and deputy Liberal Party leader, Julie Bishop, in a speech to a security forum on Wednesday. Bishop, who quit her posts when Turnbull was removed, warned that rising appeals by political leaders to populism, nationalism and protectionism to “exploit community unease” were “coinciding with a crisis of confidence in democracy.”

Bishop said this was a “dangerous combination” when the “international rules-based order” that had evolved since World War II was “under strain, even direct challenge.” She explicitly criticised US President Donald Trump, saying that many nations perceived his “America First” approach as a “zero-sum game,” where the US could only win if some other nation lost.

These remarks also point to another factor in the ousting of Turnbull, who was regarded in Washington as insufficiently committed to a US-led conflict with China.

Under these conditions, the ruling class is relying on the Labor Party and trade union leadership to suppress rising unrest in the working class and corral it behind the election of yet another pro-business and pro-US Labor government.

The depth of that discontent, after years of falling real wages, destruction of permanent jobs and deteriorating living conditions, was underscored on Tuesday when about 150,000 workers protested in Melbourne, with substantial rallies in other cities, in opposition to the corporate-government offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions. The next day, thousands of public servants joined a half-day stoppage in the island state of Tasmania and held rallies, demanding higher wages.

However, the aim of the trade unions, which called the protests, is to channel these sentiments behind the election of a Labor government that will, in reality, be committed to the dictates of the corporate elite, both for further sweeping attacks on the working class and for participation in US-led wars.

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