

More ministers quit Australia's disintegrating government

By Mike Head
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Two more senior government ministers announced last weekend their decisions to quit at the imminent federal election, highlighting both the intensifying breakup of the Liberal-National Coalition and the broader fear in ruling circles of the rising social and political discontent.

Human Services Minister Michael Keenan, a prominent Liberal, announced his departure last Friday, followed the next day by Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion, the National Party leader in the Senate. That brought to three the number of such announcements in the past week, following that of Industrial Affairs and Women's Affairs Minister Kelly O'Dwyer.

Desperate to hold his government together until the election, which he must call by mid-May, Prime Minister Scott Morrison asked all three to remain in their posts until after the poll, effectively making them lame duck ministers.

The departures are another indication of the worsening factional war tearing apart the Coalition, one of the two wings of capitalist rule since World War II. More fundamentally, the entire political establishment has become increasingly discredited and unstable over the past decade, featuring a succession of short-lived prime ministers. It is now being further destabilised by the implosion of a seven-year real estate bubble, warnings of the dire implications of the far-reaching economic warfare launched by the US against China, and the resurgence of working class struggles internationally after decades of widening social inequality.

More high-profile exits are expected, according to various media reports, notably that of former Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop and ex-Small Business Minister Craig Laundy. Like O'Dwyer, both are members of the Liberal Party's "socially progressive, economically conservative" wing who opposed the removal of their standard-bearer, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, last August.

Morrison has become a vehicle through which the Coalition's most right-wing elements, gathered around Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, are aggressively seeking to refashion the

Coalition parties along Trump-style, semi-fascistic lines to divert the deepening popular disaffection in nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese directions.

Last week's installation of right-wing indigenous businessman Warren Mundine as a party candidate, at the expense of a locally-elected candidate, underscored the faction's determination to bulldoze its plans through, even if it means wrecking the Coalition's chances of holding onto office.

Keenan, 46, once a rising star in the Liberal Party, previously held the portfolios of justice and counter-terrorism but was demoted from cabinet by Morrison despite backing Turnbull's removal. He was evidently regarded as unreliable by the Abbott-Dutton camp because he earlier supported Turnbull's ouster of Abbott in 2015.

Similar pressures confronted Scullion, 62. Such is the political turmoil that he was the only minister to serve in the same portfolio under the three Coalition prime ministers since 2013—Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison. But he only became a central leader of the rural-based National Party after Turnbull ousted Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, an Abbott supporter, who has agitated to return as party head.

Members of the Turnbull faction are mounting rear-guard actions against the Morrison-Abbott wing to cement its control of the Liberal Party.

Dutton, Abbott and two other figures centrally involved in Turnbull's ousting, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Health Minister Greg Hunt, are facing challenges in their electorates by dissident "liberals" of the Turnbull type, who are running as "independents."

Abbott's seat is being contested by a number of such people, mainly campaigning against his pro-coal industry stance of opposing action on global warming while agreeing with the core corporate program of the Liberal Party. Similarly, a former Clean Energy Finance Corporation chief executive, a proponent of "green business," is running against Frydenberg. Julia Banks, who currently sits in

parliament as an independent after defecting from the Liberal Party in protest over Turnbull's ouster, is reportedly considering standing against Hunt.

Australian columnist Peter Van Onselen, who has Liberal Party sources, last weekend warned that the Coalition could break apart if it lost the election. "Internally, the Liberal Party is deeply divided, with moderates and conservatives at war across state divisions," he wrote. "If it loses the next federal election, there is a genuine risk that the Coalition could dissolve."

Van Onselen pointed to these "problematic" tensions being exacerbated by other formations striving to outflank the Coalition on the right. He named Senator Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, David Leyonhjelm's Liberal Democrats, Bob Katter's Australian Party and Clive Palmer's United Australia Party. To that list could be added the Conservative National Party recently registered by Senator Fraser Anning, who openly advocates stopping immigration and returning to the racist White Australia policy on which the Australian federation was founded in 1901.

These groups are jockeying to exploit the widespread hostility toward all the establishment parties, Coalition, Labor and Greens, which have for decades helped enforce a corporate assault on working class jobs, working conditions, living standards and basic services.

These far-right parties are striving to channel the disaffection in jingoistic and patriotic directions as the gap widens between rich and poor, the economy lurches toward recession, and US-China war tensions intensify, raising the likelihood of Australian involvement in a catastrophic nuclear conflict against China.

This week, Deloitte Access Economics issued the latest warning of economic turmoil ahead. It said Australia's "main risk is a continuing slowdown in China," not the sharp downturn in real estate prices or the high levels of household debt, which meant "Australian families are more vulnerable to higher interest rates than families in almost any other nation in the world."

With the Coalition unravelling, elements within the ruling capitalist class are preparing to back the return of yet another Labor government as a means of containing social unrest and restabilising the parliamentary order.

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program, media oligarch Rupert Murdoch has invited Labor Party leader Bill Shorten to meet him in the United States whenever Shorten is next there. It has become a tradition for Australian prime ministers, Labor and Coalition alike, to pay court to Murdoch, who has long used his media outlets to either support or destabilise governments in Australia, Britain and the US. For now, Shorten has declined

the offer but said he will meet with Murdoch's team in Australia, which is headed by Murdoch's son, Lachlan.

Last weekend, the *Australian Financial Review* published a feature promoting Labor's shadow treasurer Chris Bowen as a "new Keating," pledged to carry through an updated version of the pro-market restructuring imposed by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, which worked closely with the trade unions to brutally redistribute wealth to the corporate elite at the expense of the working class.

Shorten has sought to capitalise on the Coalition's crisis and make a pitch to big business by accusing the government of "running out of puff" and "barely limping to the end of its term." With "fresh chaos and continuing disunity in the government," the "big issues are just not getting addressed," he said on Monday.

He did not specify the "big issues" he meant. But whichever party heads the next government, it will seek to make the working class pay for the emerging crisis by further gutting social spending, driving down real wages and breaking up working conditions. At the same time, it will boost military spending to meet Washington's demand for Australia to remain unconditionally behind the US offensive against China.

While portraying themselves, for electoral purposes, as champions of a "fair go" for workers, the Labor and union bureaucrats are fully aware they will be called upon to try to derail and suppress working class resistance. At Labor's national conference last month, Shorten said a Labor government was needed to overcome mounting "distrust and disengagement, scepticism and cynicism" toward the political system.

Venting the real hostility of the Labor and union apparatus to the re-emergence of working class struggle, party president Wayne Swan, who was treasurer in the Rudd and Gillard governments from 2007 to 2013, denounced the "yellow vest" movement in France, in which hundreds of thousands of workers have joined demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron. "Mob violence has returned to the streets of Paris after 50 years," he said, referring to the general strike movement of 1968 that shook capitalist rule in France and triggered similar upheavals around the world.

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