

Australia's mainstream parties are making Canberra the coup capital of the world

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The Australian capital has seen five prime ministers in the past six years, the result of uprisings within the alternately governing Liberal and Labor Parties. No prime minister has served a full electoral term since 2007.

Malcolm Turnbull, the sitting prime minister and leader of the centre-right Liberal Party, succumbed to an insurrection from his party's conservative fringe late last month. The facts are straightforward: after a series of poor polls and by-election defeats, he appeared vulnerable. Conservative members hated him for his support of the (successful) same-sex marriage plebiscite in 2017, his long-term involvement in the Australian Republican Movement and his belief in human-induced climate change. The fact that Turnbull had done little to support most of these causes since he became leader, ceding considerable ground to the right to shore up support for his economic agenda, didn't mollify his critics.

Led by Peter Dutton, the anti-immigration minister for home affairs, the insurgents insisted that, with Turnbull as leader, the party would haemorrhage votes to smaller right-wing parties. In particular, the nativist One Nation Party (similar to Ukip) had been making significant gains in Queensland, Dutton's home state. On 21 August Turnbull called the rebels' bluff and declared the leadership of the party (and, by default, the country) vacant. The Liberal MPs and senators who gathered in the party room were faced with a choice between Turnbull and Dutton, and backed the former by 48 votes to 35. But Turnbull was far from secure. Three days later, MPs backed another spill – the term used for the declaration that the leadership is vacant – and this time Turnbull declined to stand. He initially supported the foreign minister, Julie Bishop, in a three-way contest with Dutton and Scott Morrison, the treasurer. Bishop bowed out after receiving only 11 votes, despite having served as deputy leader of the party for 11 years. At press conferences following the coup, she described the bullying she and other female Liberal MPs had experienced from the rebels. Morrison emerged as the compromise candidate, and became prime minister on 24 August. It may not have been an outright victory for Dutton, but it was certainly a failure for the moderate wing of the party: Morrison campaigned for a 'No' vote in the same-sex marriage referendum and, as immigration minister, launched a militarised campaign, known as Operation Sovereign Borders, to intercept and imprison refugees in defiance of international law.

The roots of the current turmoil are deep. Turnbull himself deposed the previous prime minister, Tony Abbott, in a spill in September 2015. Abbott remained in Parliament as the not so secret ringleader of the conservative faction, openly plotting revenge. Before Turnbull and Abbott, the Labor prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard had repeatedly moved through the revolving doors of leadership, deposing each other with increasing bitterness. And on top of this, since mid-2017 Australian politics has been convulsed by a series of scandals related to Section 44 of the constitution, which disqualifies citizens with dual nationality from standing for Parliament. Persistent digging by political rivals revealed almost twenty sitting members who were, in some cases unknowingly, still citizens of Canada, New Zealand, Italy or Britain. In a country where more

than a quarter of all citizens were born overseas, it was striking to be reminded that a sizeable proportion of Australians could be constitutionally excluded from political power. One way and another, it isn't surprising that public dissatisfaction with the 'pollies' in Canberra is at a record high.

Why the radical instability? Domestic commentators generally point to the particularities of the Australian political system. Voting is compulsory; failing to vote earns you a fine. Governmental terms last only three years – the shortest of any established democracy. These brief parliaments mean politicians keep a constant eye on the polls, and take swift and often brutal action to hold onto power beyond the next election. If the polls look bad, it is tempting to overthrow the current leader. The rules governing leadership ballots encourage factionalism. Most party leaders are elected by sitting members of Parliament, with no input from the party membership and with only a simple majority needed to 'roll' a prime minister. Following its own spills in 2010 and 2013, the Labor Party, now the main opposition, has changed its bylaws to give rank and file members a say in leadership decisions. But these rules have yet to be tested, and those watching the British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn are nervous of a similar split between the parliamentary party and the members.

The two houses of the Australian government are modelled on the Westminster system: the majority party in the House of Representatives forms the government and introduces new legislation. There is a leader of the opposition, usually the leader of the largest party outside the government, and a shadow cabinet. There is an upper house, the Senate, which resembles an elected House of Lords, but has more powers. And, of course, the queen is the head of state. The six states – the former autonomous British colonies – have their own constitutions and parliaments; functions are divided between them and the federal government. Seats in the House of Representatives are proportional to population and the 150 MPs are elected by full preferential voting: you have to list all the candidates on your ballot paper in order of preference. This system, in place since 1919, means that a coalition (like the Liberal-National coalition currently in government) can contest the same seats without dividing votes.

The cascading coups have eroded voters' faith, with critics calling for direct accountability. Opinion polling, which is increasingly fetishised, gives mixed messages. Turnbull justified his successful spill against Abbott in 2015 by pointing to thirty polls showing the ruling Liberal-National coalition well behind the Labor opposition. This year Turnbull's opponents used this metric to justify their challenge when under his leadership the party suffered a similar fate. Although politicians publicly call for surveys capturing a broad cross-section of the population, privately they are more interested in gauging the strength of their own base support. In the case of the Liberal Party, disproportionate weight was given to the views of a small section of the electorate: those voters thought to be at risk of jumping ship to the far right and voting for One Nation.

Australia is not alone in its current unease about the nature of representative democracy, or in its politicians' anxious concessions to the right. Dutton's ability to challenge Turnbull rested on his claim that his social conservatism would prevent similarly minded voters from turning to extremists. This strategy might have benefited Dutton in the short term, but it distorts the political field. Parliamentarians, insecure about their legitimacy, are behaving increasingly undemocratically. The Liberal Party's conservative faction has little appeal to the almost 50 per cent of Australians who were born, or have a parent who was born, outside Australia, and against whom the Anglophone, nationalist rhetoric of One Nation is directed. But Canberra's political elite seems unable to decide how much the opinion of this segment of the population matters. Until it does so, the bloodletting looks set to continue.

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