



Australia's Hung Parliament and Elections

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Introduction

A surprise defeat in an October 20 parliamentary by-election in the Australian electorate of Wentworth left the *conservative* Liberal Party-led government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison without a majority in parliament. Independent politician Kerryn Phelps' victory in the Wentworth district ended extended conservative control of the seat, which was long held by former Liberal Party Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. One interpretation of the swing in voter sentiment away from the Liberal candidate is that voters sought to punish the party for ousting Turnbull as Prime Minister and Party Leader in August 2018. The next national parliamentary election is now expected in May 2019.

Hung Parliament

The current hung parliament consists of 75 members of the Liberal-National Coalition, 69 Labor Party members, and 6 crossbenchers. If any one of the crossbench MPs align themselves with the Liberal-National Coalition, the government would once again have a majority in parliament. Conversely, if all of the independents align themselves with the Labor Party, the Morrison government would fall and elections would be called. That said, the recently elected Phelps reportedly believes governments should serve their full terms except under exceptional circumstances and that responsible crossbenchers should limit the chaos resulting from a hung parliament. A mid-October 2018 poll indicates that the Coalition (47%) trails Labor (53%) in a two-party-preferred vote. The government's coalition in the 76-member Australian Senate includes 25 Liberal Party, 5 National Party, and 1 Country Liberal Party members. The opposition in the Senate includes 26 Labor Party MPs while the crossbench includes 9 Green Party members and 10 smaller party and independent members.

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Policy Implications

A hung parliament creates uncertainty internally and externally. Despite the political uncertainty cast by the result, there is considerable consensus among both the ruling Liberal-National Coalition and the opposition Labor Party regarding the U.S.-Australia alliance. However, Australia's policies on refugees and climate change—two areas of importance to the newly elected Phelps—may be more deeply affected. Prime Minister Morrison is reportedly under pressure from independent Members of Parliament (MPs) and from moderates within his Liberal Party to take more concrete measures in order for Australia to reach its 2030 Paris climate change targets. The government may also come under pressure to relax some of its policies on refugees, in particular to allow families to leave Australia's detention facilities on Nauru. It was reported on October 23 that Labor has proposed a plan to send refugee families with children on Nauru to New Zealand. Australia's relations with Muslim-majority Indonesia may also be affected should Morrison follow through with his statement that he was open to moving Australia's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The proposal was reportedly put forward in an effort to bolster Liberal support in Wentworth, where approximately 12.5% of the electorate are Jewish.

Significant shifts in Australia's external policy or approach to the alliance are not expected should Labor win the next election. Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten unveiled a Labor election manifesto in October 2018 focused on health, education, and the cost of living. Australia Labor Party Shadow Foreign Minister, Penny Wong recently described Australia's alliance with the United States as “a relationship built around shared strategic objectives underpinned by shared fundamental values.... Our alliance is both contemporary—facing up to the current complexities that distinguish the Indo-Pacific area as a critical contributor to global strategic stability—and forward looking—facing up to the emerging shifts in power that underpin the dynamism of Asia.” Wong is also reported as cautioning against framing foreign policy in terms of globalism vs. patriotism and has pointed to the need to keep the international rules-based order intact. It has also been observed that Australia's political instability undermines its ability to act as a regional leader.

Political Context

The Australian constitution states that House of Representatives elections must be held every three years. The current Coalition government was elected in 2016; therefore, the next elections in Australia must be called by May 2019, though the prime minister may call the election early. Morrison took control of the Liberal Party and became Prime Minister by ousting former Prime Minister Turnbull from within the Liberal Party in an internal Liberal Party leadership “spill.” Morrison, also known as “ScoMo” in the Australian press, is a Pentecostal Christian who has held senior portfolios, including Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, and Treasurer.

The move to remove Turnbull was launched by former Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton after Turnbull lost 34 consecutive opinion polls. Turnbull himself came to power in 2015 when Liberal Party MPs selected him to replace then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott as leader of the Party. Such party leadership coups have been the result of internal struggles between conservative and more moderate members of the Liberal Party. A disgruntled Turnbull resigned his seat in Parliament following his ouster as Prime Minister, which led to the Wentworth by-election. Australia has had a number of prime ministers in recent years: Scott Morrison (2018-), Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018), Tony Abbott (2013-2015), Kevin Rudd (2013-2013 and 2007-2010), and Julia Gillard (2010-2013).

While the huge swing against the Coalition in the Wentworth by-election may be due to factors particular to that election, it does seem that there is a preference among Australian voters over the past two years to favor the Australian Labor Party over the Coalition. Based on this by-election, as well as recent polls, it appears that Labor may win the next election in May 2019. Given this possibility, observers and

decisionmakers may consider how a Labor-led Australian government might differ in its approach to foreign affairs and the alliance.

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