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Next one, please!

After infighting in the Liberal Party, Australia now has its sixth leader in eight years. That's an electoral gift to Labor

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On 24 August 2018, then Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull was ousted by infighting in his Liberal Party of Australia, as a right-wing faction in the party refused to support Turnbull's climate change policy. In a close race, former treasurer Scott Morrison took over after a closed door leadership ballot. Turnbull, in turn, quite the Australian Parliament, triggering a by-election that might see Morrison losing his narrow parliamentary majority.

The centre-left Australian Labor Party was already able to capitalise on the chaos in the governing party. It hopes to gain power in the next 2019 Australian elections.

Michael Bröning spoke to Australian journalist Peter Browne about these recent political developments in Australia.

Australia has a new prime minister, Scott Morrison, the sixth leader in just over eight years. What does the change mean for the future course of the country?

The change in prime minister seems unlikely to have a significant impact on government policy in the short to medium term, partly because Scott Morrison's views on key policy areas are not significantly different from his predecessor's, Malcolm Turnbull, and partly because a federal election is due by May next year. The government is likely to be defeated, just as it probably would have been defeated under Turnbull.

Australian political history shows that governments changing leaders in this way are almost always defeated at the subsequent election, either because they were already doomed or because voters are

unimpressed by the sudden change in leader, or both. Adding to the time pressure is the fact that Australian prime ministers have great flexibility in the timing of elections, and often call an early election to capitalise on perceived advantages, such as improvements in polling. When the former Australian Labor Party leader Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd as prime minister in 2010, for example, she called an election almost immediately to capitalise on an improvement in the polls.

One feature of politics in recent years is likely to change, though. Given the looming election, the small group of extreme right-wing politicians who have destabilised the Liberal Party of Australia from within are likely to moderate their stance in the hope of re-election, which should contribute to a period of relative stability.

On climate policy, Malcolm Turnbull had already watered down his commitment to reducing carbon emissions, despite his personal convictions, but it seems highly unlikely that Scott Morrison will strengthen policy in this area before the election. There could be a slight softening of refugee policy, given a growing concern about the welfare of asylum seekers being detained offshore. On economic policy, the new prime minister's views are similar to those of his predecessor; on health and education little change from the trajectory of current policy is likely.

International media have characterised Morrison as rather right-wing within the party. Is this label justified? And is the party and the country going to move further to the right as a consequence?

Although he was seen as a moderate when he entered parliament in 2007, Scott Morrison's views appeared to harden during his period as shadow immigration minister (2009–13) and then as immigration minister (2013–14). As treasurer since 2015, he has argued for cuts in company tax rates and successfully proposed cuts in top marginal tax rates (along with lesser cuts at lower incomes) in this year's federal budget. Unusually among Australian politicians he is a Pentecostal Christian, but he has also warned against treating the Bible as 'a policy handbook.'

He is probably best characterised as a centre-right politician with economically liberal views and socially conservative views, whereas Malcolm Turnbull – though broadly of the same mind on economic policy – was a social liberal. The dynamics within the party mean that Turnbull's government wasn't especially liberal on social issues, so we can expect more continuity under Morrison than the two leaders' personal views might suggest.

Morrison gained this post by winning an ugly and bitter leadership election in the Liberal party. Nationwide elections are due next year. How will Labor respond to this change? Will they be able to benefit from the Liberals' turmoil?

The leadership change gives Labor more ammunition for its argument that the government is self-absorbed, overly influenced by its own right-wing MPs and the conservative media, as well as out of step with mainstream opinion. Prior to last week's events, the government's position in the polls appeared to be improving; if that trend had continued, Labor might well have reviewed its approach. The early signs (a major poll published recently) suggest that the change in leaders has been very unpopular among voters, which means Labor won't be forced to rethink its election pitch.

The other side of Labor's strategy is a series of high-profile policies broadly designed to reduce inequality. Many commentators have depicted these as electorally risky policies, and they are certainly at odds with the conventional wisdom among commentators that opposition parties should be careful not to set up too many targets for the government to fire at. But Labor's relatively strong showing, with similar policies, at the 2016 election has encouraged it to spell out policies in some detail.

The change in the Liberal's leadership will also take some pressure off the Labor leader, Bill Shorten, whose unpopularity has made him the target of leadership speculation in recent months.



Peter Browne
Melbourne

Peter Browne is editor of Inside Story, a news magazine based in Melbourne. He has worked in broadcasting, academic publishing, and higher education, writing for a number of magazines and newspapers, including The Canberra Times, New Statesman, Guardian Weekly, and the Griffith Review.