

Australia: Political development and data for 2017

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Introduction

The Liberal-National government's slimmest of winning margins continued to haunt its performance during 2017 (Taflaga and Wanna (2018)). Malcolm Turnbull continued to lead opposition leader Bill Shorten as preferred Prime Minister; however, throughout 2017, the Coalition government was unable to close the gap on the Labor opposition in two-party preferred terms. If an election had been held in December 2017, it was predicted that the Coalition would lose more than a dozen seats if the poll results were repeated at an election (Crowe 2017). Plagued by numerous policy missteps and beset by ongoing leadership tensions, the government faced yet another difficult year. The entire parliament was blind-sighted by what would become the 'Citizenship Saga', which saw large numbers of parliamentarians forced to clarify their eligibility to sit in parliament under Section 44 of the Australian Constitution, with seven senators and ruled illegible and forced to resign from parliament and two MPs forced to recontest their seats in by-elections (for more on this, see below). Australia finally legalized same-sex marriage. Although the next election is not due until 2019, the year ended with predictions that an election in 2018 was possible. Alongside this, the continued presence of a hostile Senate forced the government to the negotiating table over several policy proposals. Finally, after a contentious plebiscite, the Australian parliament ended 2017 by legalizing same-sex marriage.

Election report

Despite the government's precarious position, and some in the media suggesting an election was a possibility, no federal election resulted in 2017. However, two by-elections were held in December 2017, and while these did not change the make-up of the parliament, they attracted considerable attention. Both were a result of the incumbents being found to have breached Section 44 of the Australian Constitution which disqualifies dual nationals from holding parliamentary office. This constitutional provision predates the creation of Australian citizenship, and the High Court's strict interpretation of the constitution has led to the disqualification of several candidates in the past. The two federal members who were forced to resign, renounce their non-Australian citizenship and contest by-elections in December were Barnaby Joyce, leader of the National Party (NP) and Deputy Prime Minister, and John Alexander, Liberal Party (LP) member for Bennelong in New South Wales (NSW). Both incumbents had been elected in 2016 with fairly safe margins (Joyce's was 16 per cent, Alexander's was 9 per cent), and both were expected to retain their seats.

In the end, Alexander reduced his margin by 4.84 per cent, making the seat marginal, while Barnaby Joyce increased his margin by 7.2 per cent despite there being 17 candidates standing for the seat. Joyce's increase was in part because of the absence of high-profile independent candidate Tony Windsor who had challenged Joyce in 2016, but chose not to run again (Curtin 2018). In February 2018, Joyce resigned his ministerial and NP leadership roles after acknowledging he was in a relationship with a former staffer.

Sub-national elections

There were two state-level elections in 2017. The Western Australia (WA) state election was held on Saturday, 11 March, with the two-term incumbent Liberal–WA National coalition government, led by Premier Colin Barnett defeated by the Labor opposition. Labor won easily, with 55 per cent of the vote resulting in it taking 41 of the 59 seats in the Legislative Assembly. Labor's success came off the back of victories in the state capital Perth, where it won 34 of the 43 seats. It was considered the worst defeat of a sitting government in WA, with seven government ministers losing their seats. However, incoming Labor Premier Mark McGowan and his government did not win a majority in the state's upper house (they hold 14 of the 36 seats), thus requiring the support of at least five additional votes from the Green Party (GP) and either the Liberal Democrats, One Nation or the Shooters and Fishers Party to pass legislation (Western Australian Electoral Commission 2017).

The 2017 Queensland state election was held on 25 November to elect 93 members of the Legislative Assembly. The incumbent Labor government, first elected in 2015, called an early election and the result was exceptionally close. Although it won 48 seats, which was sufficient to govern alone, the result took two weeks to determine. The Liberal-National Party leader Tim Nicholls then announced his resignation and was replaced by Deb Frecklington (*The Guardian* 2017).

Labor has now won government in nine of the last 10 Queensland elections and a number of historical milestones were achieved as a result of Labor's win. Anastacia Palaszczuk became the first Australian women premier to win government from opposition and then be re-elected. Alongside this, Queensland saw the election of the first Torres Strait Islander, Cynthia Lui (Labor); the first South Sea Islander, Stephen Andrew (One Nation) and the first elected Greens MP Michael Berkman (former Queensland Greens MP Ronan Lee was elected as a Labor Party MP, then defected to the Greens in 2008 and left parliament in 2009). Queensland is currently transitioning to four-year fixed terms following the successful 2016 referendum, and the next election is due in October 2020 (Electoral Commission Queensland 2017).

Finally, despite NSW not due to have a state election until 2019, the incumbent premier Mike Baird resigned as leader in January 2017. Premier since April 2014, Baird was initially very popular, but his poll ratings began to decline in 2016 over the initial banning of greyhound racing, council amalgamations and lockout laws (Doherty 2017). Baird was replaced by Gladys Berejiklian, the state's second woman premier and Australia's first female LP premier.

Cabinet report

The Turnbull government began 2017 with a cabinet reshuffle after Health Minister Sussan Ley became embroiled in an expenses scandal. A number of other resignations followed as a result of the dual-citizenship saga (for more detail, see below). The most significant was that of Barnaby Joyce, who was both a minister, deputy prime minister and leader of the NP. In addition, his deputy, Fiona Nash, was found to have dual citizenship leading to her resignation from cabinet and parliament. Several temporary ministerial appointments were made to cover October and November. On 20 December, the Prime Minister announced a full cabinet reshuffle. Five new ministers came into cabinet, one of whom was woman and two of whom were NP MPs.

Parliament report

Despite there being two by-elections held in 2017, there was no change to the party or gender composition of the House of Representatives. However, the dual-citizenship saga ensured membership of the Senate was in a state of flux throughout the latter half of 2017. High-profile resignations from the Senate included the deputy co-leaders of the Greens and several ministers, including the Minister for Resources, and the Deputy Leader of the NP (see Cabinet report). In all, seven incumbents were referred to the High Court in relation to citizenship matters, with five ruled ineligible by the court on 27 October (Byrne 2017). Yet another round of resignations, referrals and threats of referral emerged after the President of the Senate, Senator Stephen Parry, revealed that he, too, was a dual citizen in light of the court's ruling. Independent Jacqui Lambie was also forced to resign for the same reason on 14 November and Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) Senator Skye Kakoschke-Moore resigned the following week (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 2017). A number of Labor incumbents, including the Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, were called upon to clarify their status.

The end result was the announcement of a citizenship register by the Prime Minister on 13 November. Turnbull also deferred scheduled parliamentary sittings until after two by-elections were held, shielding the government from sitting as a minority. The process generated more confusion as it emerged that Labor, which had successfully deflected accusations for months by claiming that the party had superior candidate vetting procedures, ran into difficulties when five of its own could not satisfactorily clarify their citizenship status. Both Senator Katy Gallagher (Australian Capital Territory) and David Feeney, Member for Batman, were forced to wait till 2018 for a High Court decision on their status (Gartrell & Massola 2017). The citizenship saga sparked debate over constitutional reform, but no concrete resolution was determined in 2017.

In addition, several senators were ruled ineligible under another subsection of Section 44 of the Constitution. Senator Rob Culleton (elected as One Nation but became an Independent) was ruled ineligible on 10 January because he was declared bankrupt. Family First (FP) Senator Bob Day was ruled ineligible on 6 April due to his pecuniary interest in relation to the rental on his electoral office. By year's end, nine senators and two MPs had been forced to resign in 2017, and more were expected to follow in 2018 (for a full

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Turnbull II in Australia in 2017

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet:	Inception From Minimum winning coalition (MWC)	19 July 2016 1 January 2017	Dissolution Until	Still in office at the end of 2017 31 December 2017
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2017	Seats in cabinet <i>N</i> %	Seats held by women <i>N</i> % of party	Seats in parliament (Reps) <i>N</i> %	
Liberal Party (LP) ^a	19 82.6%	5 26.3%	60 40.0%	
National Party (NP) ^a	4 17.4%	1 25.0%	16 10.7%	
Totals	23 100.0%	6 26.1%	76 50.7%	
B. Composition of Turnbull I cabinet on 1 January 2017				
See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Australia or http://politicaldatayearbook.com				
C. Changes in composition of Turnbull II cabinet during 2017				
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister for Health and Sports	Sussan Ley (1961 female, LP)	13 January	Gregory Hunt (1965 male, LP)	Resigned as a result of an expenses scandal
Ministry for Industry Innovation and Science	Gregory Hunt (1965 male, LP)	13 January	Arthur Sinodinos (1957 male, LP)	Moved to Health portfolio as a result of Ley's resignation
Minister for Resources and Northern Australia	Matthew Canavan (1980 male, LNP) ^a	27 July	Barnaby Joyce (1967 male, NP)	Resigned while dual citizenship claims were being investigated; returned to Cabinet 27 October
Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources; Deputy Prime Minister	Barnaby Joyce (1967 male, NP)	27 October	Malcolm Turnbull (1954 male, LP) Deputy Prime Minister role left vacant	Resigned while awaiting the outcome of a by-election; returned to Cabinet 6 December
Minister for Regional Development, Local Government, Infrastructure and Transport	Fiona Nash (1965 female, NP)	27 October	Darren Chester (1967 male, NP)	Resigned from the Senate as a result of dual citizenship
Minister for Communications and Regional Communications	As above	As above	Mitch Fifield (1967 male, LP)	As above
Attorney General (Leader of Government in the Senate)	George Brandis (1957 male, LP)	20 December	Christian Porter (1970 male, LP)	Reshuffle
Minister for Infrastructure and Transport	Darren Chester (1967 male, NP)	20 December	Barnaby Joyce (1967 male, NP)	Reshuffle
Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science	Arthur Sinodinos (1957 male, LP)	20 December	Michaelia Cash (1970 female, LP)	Reshuffle and new ministry retitled Jobs and Innovation
Minister for Social Services	Christian Porter (1970 male, LP)	20 December	Daniel Tehan (1968 male, LP)	Reshuffle. Porter remains in Cabinet (given Attorney General)

Table 1. Continued

C. Changes in composition of Turnbull II cabinet during 2017						
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments		
Minister for Human Services	New portfolio	20 December	Michael Keenan (1972 male, LP)	Reshuffle		
Minister for Women and Assisting the Prime Minister in Public Services	Michaela Cash (1970 female, LP)	20 December	Kelly O'Dwyer (1977 female, LP)	Reshuffle. Dwyer retains Revenue and Financial Services		
Minister for Rural Health, Sport and Regional Communications	Mitch Fifield (1967 male, LP)	20 December	Bridget McKenzie (1969 female, NP)	Reshuffle. Fifield keeps Communication and Arts; regional portfolio expanded		
Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources	Barnaby Joyce (1967 male, NP)	20 December	David Littleproud (1976 male, NP)	Reshuffle. Joyce takes Infrastructure and Transport		
Minister for Regional Development, Territories and Local Government	Darren Chester (1967 male, NP)	20 December	John McVeigh (1965 male, LP)	Reshuffle		
D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017						
	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	% of party	<i>N</i>	%
Liberal Party (LP)	19	82.6%	4	21.1%	60	40.0%
National Party (NP)	4	17.4%	1	25.0%	16	10.7%
Totals	23	100.0%	5	21.7%	76	50.7%

Note: ^aIn 2008, the Queensland divisions of the Nationals and Liberals merged to become the Liberal-National Party of Queensland. Federally, the two parties operate as one for the purposes of the election campaign, but sit in their respective caucuses once elected. In 2017, the EPDY table (Curtin 2017) reported the Queensland Liberal-National Party as a separate entity. However, as parliament officially records Queensland LNP MPs as either LP or NP MPs, we have re-calculated the 2017 figures accordingly.

Sources: Parliament of Australia (2016a), Curtin (2017).

timeline, see ABC 2017). On 28 November, Prime Minister Turnbull referred matters relating to Section 44 of the Constitution to the Joint Committee on Electoral Matters for inquiry.

However, despite these resignations, the distribution of seats by party resulted in minor changes because Section 15 of the Constitution requires the parliament of the state represented by the vacating senator to select a person of the same party to hold the place until the expiration of the term. However, Cory Bernardi, a former Liberal senator, defected and created a new political party, the Australian Conservatives. The total number of women in the Senate decreased by one overall in 2017, but this followed from a number of changes across several parties resulting from resignations of both men and women who had been identified as having dual citizenship.

Table 2. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (House of Representatives) in Australia in 2017

Party	1 January 2017 ^a				31 December 2017			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Australian Labor Party (ALP)	69	46.0%	28	40.5%	69	46.0%	28	40.5%
Liberal Party (LP)	60	40.0%	12	20.0%	60	40.0%	12	20.0%
National Party (NP)	16	10.6%	1	6.3%	16	10.6%	1	6.3%
Green Party (GP)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
Katter's Australian Party (KAP)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
Independent (I)	2	1.3%	1	50.0%	2	1.3%	1	50.0%
Nick Xenophon Team (NXT)	1	0.7%	1	100.0%	1	0.7%	1	100.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	43	28.7%	150	100.0%	43	28.7%

Note: ^aIn 2008, the Queensland divisions of the Nationals and Liberals merged to become the Liberal-National Party of Queensland. Federally, the two parties operate as one for the purposes of the election campaign, but sit in their respective caucuses once elected. In 2017, the EPDY table (Curtin 2017) reported the Queensland Liberal-National Party as a separate entity. However, as parliament officially records Queensland LNP MPs as either the LP or NP MPs, we have re-calculated the 2017 figures accordingly. Source: Parliament of Australia (2016b), Curtin (2017).

Table 3. Party and gender composition of the upper house of parliament (Senate) in Australia in 2017

Party	1 January 2017 ^a				31 December 2017			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Australian Labor Party (ALP)	26	34.2%	14	53.8%	26	34.2%	15	57.7%
Liberal Party (LP)	24	31.6%	7	29.2%	25	32.9%	7	28.0%
National Party (NP)	5	6.6%	2	40.0%	5	6.6%	1	20.0%
Country Liberal Party (CLP)	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Green Party (GP)	9	11.8%	5	55.6%	9	11.8%	4	44.4%
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Family First (FFFP)	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–
Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) ^b	3	3.9%	1	33.3%	2	2.6%	0	0.0%
Jackie Lambie Network	1	1.3%	1	100.0%	–	–	–	–
Pauline Hanson One Nation Party	4	5.3%	1	25.0%	3	3.9%	1	33.3%
Australian Conservatives	–	–	–	–	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Derryn Hinch Justice Party	1	1.3%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Independent	–	–	–	–	2	2.6%	0	0.0%
Totals	76	100.0%	30	39.5%	76	100.0%	28	36.8%

Notes: ^aIn Queensland, the Liberals and Nationals run as a combined party at the state level, but the winning candidates sit with either the Liberal or National caucus once elected to federal parliament. In 2017, the EPDY table (Curtin 2017) reported the Queensland Liberal-National Party as a separate entity. However, as parliament officially records Queensland LNP senators as either the LP or NP senators, we have re-calculated the 2017 figures accordingly.

^bNick Xenophon resigned from the Senate to stand for the South Australian State election in October 2017. He was succeeded by Rex Patrick. Skye Kakoschke-Moore (NXT) resigned from the Senate in November 2017. Her replacement was confirmed in February 2018, and is included here to keep the total senators elected to 76. These two NXT senators now sit as members of the 'Centre Alliance'.

Source: Parliament of Australia (2016c), Curtin (2017).

Institutional changes

As is normal practice, the Joint Standing Committee on All Electoral Matters was asked by the Special Minister of State to inquire into and report on all aspects of the 2016 Federal Election including a review of political donations. In part as a result of concerns around foreign donations, the committee recommended that a separate inquiry be undertaken to examine personal funding from candidates, private funding from donors and public funding. A discussion paper was released in September 2017, and the Inquiry into the Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017 was introduced and read for the first time in the Senate on 6 December 2017. If passed, the new legislation will prohibit the use of foreign donations to fund public debates or political actors.

In the wake of the expenses scandal surrounding Sussan Ley, Prime Minister Turnbull announced a new body to manage parliamentary entitlements modelled on the changes made in the UK in 2009. The new scheme saw travel allowances for former politicians abolished and the introduction of near-real time reporting (Belot 2017).

Issues in national politics

Once again, energy politics dominated Australian politics throughout 2017. Australia's inability to find a lasting consensus on its approach to climate change and its future energy mix underwrote debate about the closure of ageing coal-fired power stations, state-wide power failures in the summer heat and the announcement of new hydroelectric schemes. Prime Minister Turnbull struggled to reconcile his own support for a low-carbon future with coal advocates within his government. By year's end the future of the controversial Carmichael coalmine, more commonly referred as the Adani coalmine, was in serious doubt as the Queensland Labor government withdrew support for the project in November, and the mine failed to gain finance from the private sector domestically or internationally (Slezak 2017a). Likewise, the scaling back of the Shenhua coalmine on prime farming land in NSW signalled growing resistance to mining and coal seam gas exploration by communities along the eastern coast of Australia (Slezak 2017b).

The second persistent debate was housing affordability (Dale 2017) and related tax concessions. The issue spoke to broader concerns about social inequality in Australia, including slow wages growth, cuts to workers' penalty rates and heightened anxieties about the government's broader industrial relations agenda. In the 2017 Budget, the government finally abandoned several policy proposals first mooted in the government's disastrous 2014 Budget. In rhetorical terms, the 2017 Budget represented a pivot towards the language on social equality, with a proposed levy on Australia's banks and empty rental properties, and to offer first homeowners assistance getting into the property market (Holman 2017).

The offshore detention of asylum-seekers continued in 2017, prompting a steady flow of reports of the worsening conditions on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea (PNG)). In February, the government was embarrassed by US President Donald Trump's decision to rescind a refugee resettlement deal struck with the former Barack Obama administration (Tovey & McIlroy 2017). In October, the government's closure of the Manus Island

detention centre as a result of a ruling by the High Court of Papua New Guinea (PNG) that the camp was unconstitutional led to a highly publicized standoff that lasted 25 days as more than 300 refugees refused to leave the camp (Whyte 2017).

The decision to hold a non-binding referendum, or ‘postal survey’, on legalizing same-sex marriage dominated politics in the second half of the year. The government’s inability to legislate within the party highlighted leadership and ideological tensions within the government, which saw Conservatives opposed to same-sex marriage arrange the compromise position of the postal survey (Murphy & Karp 2017). Initially Labor opposed the non-binding survey, and a clutch of groups and MPs unsuccessfully challenged the vote in the High Court (Doran 2017a). The vote was ultimately seen as a success and a win for Prime Minister Turnbull, despite incidents of offensive campaigning. Overall, 79.9 per cent of voters participated and it produced a yes vote of 61.6 per cent to 38.4 per cent (Baker & Sisson 2017). Despite a last-minute rear-guard manoeuvre by socially conservative MPs within the government, same-sex marriage passed into law on 7 December, ending with members in the House of Representatives spontaneously bursting into a rendition of ‘I am Australian’ (Wright 2017).

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