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AUSTRALIA UPDATE: New Prime Minister

August 24, 2018

- **Scott Morrison was sworn in as Australia's 39th Prime Minister on August 24** after a conservative “spill” initiative in the Liberal Party led by Peter Dutton led to the ouster of PM Malcolm Turnbull but resulted in the victory of Morrison over Dutton 45-40 in a secret ballot. The choice of Morrison was seen as a victory for the moderate faction within the party.
- **Energy and Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg was elected deputy Liberal leader and replaces Morrison as Treasurer.** Outgoing deputy leader, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, had stood for PM in a 3-way race but was knocked out in the first round.
- **Turnbull has indicated he will resign from Parliament, which will cause a by-election for his seat in Wentworth, part of Sydney.** The government currently has a single-seat majority in the House of Representatives. The next general election doesn't have to be called until May 2019 but pressure for an earlier date is likely to increase.

The immediate cause of spill was **conservative frustration** with what was seen as **Turnbull's left-wing tendencies, especially on social issues and energy** policy. Just prior to the spill, Turnbull tried to satisfy his conservative critics by giving up his signature “national energy guarantee” by **suspending plans to legislate the emissions reduction** component and **backing away from Australia's Paris Accord targets.**

Morrison, although backed by the moderate faction, is seen as much more conservative than Turnbull. Prior to serving as Treasurer, he was **Immigration minister** and an architect of Australia's controversial hardline asylum-seeker policies – including indefinite detention on remote foreign islands. He is an active member of a Sydney Pentecostal evangelical mega church and **voted against same-sex marriage, which passed Parliament by 62%** following a national referendum on the subject.

Liberal party concern over Turnbull's chances in the next general election, was a contributing factor in the spill effort. But Morrison isn't widely known or popular and appears less electable than Turnbull. Polls long have had the opposition Labor coalition leading the Liberal-National Coalition, though Turnbull led as preferred Prime Minister throughout his tenure. **Indeed, Julie Bishop is the most popular politician in Australia.** In a poll held the day before the spill ballot, she held a 28-point lead over Bill Shorten. Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton both were seen as losing to Shorten, Dutton by a wide margin.

The turmoil in the Liberal Party is seen as an unforced error by party leaders, generating headlines from leading commentators such as "*Liberals broken beyond repair*" and "*Pointless: Australian democracy is now an even bigger laughing stock.*" Australia now has had five prime ministers in just over five years. Voters are puzzled over the turmoil and see the party infighting as serving no national purpose. They are likely to clamor for a new election as soon as possible, something Morrison will resist and Labor already has begun to push. Morrison has pledged stability and is unlikely to make significant changes in foreign policy, trade, or relations with the United States or China in the near term. **Observers will look for cabinet changes, which he expects to make over the weekend.**