

Australia:

New push to block registration of independent political parties

Mike Head
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Just two months after a state election in which support for the two major parliamentary parties fell to a new low, these same parties are preparing a scheme to make it more difficult for other political parties to register for elections. The Carr Labor Party government in New South Wales unveiled the plans last week, with the intention of rushing them through a September 11 referendum, backed by the opposition Liberal-National Party Coalition.

In the March 27 election, nearly 25 percent of the vote went to other parties or independents, indicating rising discontent with the official political framework after two decades of declining living standards. In the ballot for the Legislative Council, the state's upper house, support for independents and others rose even further, to 35.3 percent, compared to just 37.3 percent for Labor and 27.4 percent for the Coalition.

When Treasurer Michael Egan released the government's proposals he claimed that their aim was to reduce the size and power of the upper house, which can block legislation. He spoke of saving taxpayers \$2.2 million a year by cutting the number of MPs by eight. He demagogically called for no repeat of the March 27 election's tablecloth-size upper house ballot paper, which carried the names of 264 candidates.

The real purpose of the plan is somewhat different: to increase the barriers to the registration of parties that are not currently represented in parliament. To stand in an election, parties will have to have a member already in parliament or lodge the names of 1,000 members (currently 200), pay a \$3,500 establishment fee (currently no fee) and be registered for 12 months before nominating candidates. Egan referred only to the upper house, yet the new rules will apply regardless of

whether the party is standing for the lower or upper house of parliament.

These requirements further erode democratic rights. It already costs \$500 (upper house) and \$250 (lower house) to stand each candidate. For the entrenched parties these fees are no problem. They receive millions of dollars annually in corporate donations and government election sponsorship.

Another aspect of Egan's scheme is to impose a minimum quota of 3 percent of the statewide primary vote for election to the upper house. At present, the preferential voting system means that candidates can swap preference votes with each other, enabling one candidate to win a seat with as little as 0.2 percent of the primary vote. Egan declared the new rules to be more democratic. In reality, they will favour heavily-financed and widely-publicised parties.

In addition, candidates will have to obtain a higher quota after the allocation of preferences—5.55 percent rather than 4.54 percent. This flows from a reduction in the size of the upper house from 42 to 34.

The government's plan involves curbing the upper house's power to reject legislation. It will introduce a deadlock procedure, allowing the government to convene a joint sitting of both parliamentary chambers to pass bills that have been rejected twice by the Legislative Council. The present government holds a 17-seat majority in the lower house; enough to overcome its minority status in the upper house, where there are 13 independent and other MPs.

Egan also proclaimed this procedure to be “democratic” but its essential purpose is to ensure the implementation of unpopular measures. In an article championing the plan, Egan quoted from a *Sydney*

Morning Herald editorial last January: “Choice is fundamental to democracy but so is the election of governments able to govern.” The so-called upper house cross-benches—an assortment of Greens, Australian Democrats, Christian Democrats, independents and others, such as the Shooters Party and the Unity Party—are special interest and single issue groups whose particular concerns have in the past sometimes delayed or frustrated the passage of government legislation.

In recent years, the Carr government has already had no hesitation in working closely with the conservative Coalition to ram through pro-business legislation, including simultaneous bills to reopen the toxic Port Kembla copper smelter and prevent legal appeals by residents against major development projects.

Besides heading the campaign for the new electoral system, Egan is best known for his fervent support for the privatisation of the state's electricity grid. He and Premier Bob Carr advocated privatisation in 1997 but dropped it in the face of opposition among electricity workers and other working people. At the last election, Carr and Egan posed as opponents of privatisation, allowing them to scrape back into office.

Within the political establishment, Egan's proposals have strong bipartisan endorsement. Both the official opposition leader, Kerry Chikarovski of the Liberal Party, and her deputy, George Souris of the National Party, have endorsed them in principle. John Della Bosca, the powerbroker of Labor's dominant right-wing faction, was personally involved in drafting the package.

Significantly, David Oldfield, the single state MP for the extreme right-wing One Nation party, has stridently backed the government's plan. Oldfield, elected to the upper house on March 27 on 6.3 percent of the primary vote, said he agreed with requiring MPs to have “reasonable support”.

The corporate-controlled mass media is promoting the political restructuring. Rupert Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, ran an editorial urging the government to go further by calling on voters to abolish the upper house and “rid the State of this anachronism”.

The upper house, formerly elected only by wealthy property owners, is a relic of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century. But today it functions in much the

same way as the lower house, except that its members sit for eight years, not four, and they are elected on a statewide basis, making it slightly easier for small parties to gain seats. Labor Party and trade union leaders once proposed the abolition of parliamentary upper houses as privileged and anti-democratic. Today that same demand is coming from ruling circles—to make the parliamentary process even less democratic.



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