

# Australian parliamentary committee calls for further anti-democratic electoral laws

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A far-reaching erosion of basic electoral rights is being prepared in Australia, following a parliamentary report urging the imposition of onerous requirements for party registration for elections, as well as anti-democratic changes to the senate voting system.

There are suggestions in the media today from two minor party senators that the changes may be postponed until closer to the scheduled 2016 federal election, because the Abbott government currently needs the votes of the minor parties to secure the passage of key budget cuts. The government has not confirmed these claims, however.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters issued an interim report in May, responding to the outcome of last September's federal election, in which almost a quarter of voters rejected the existing parties of the political establishment—Labor, Liberal-National and Greens.

The election outcome gave some indication of the disaffection of millions of working class voters from the entire parliamentary elite. Because of the disgust generated by the pro-business measures implemented by the six-year-old Labor government, the Liberal-National Coalition led by Tony Abbott was able to secure a commanding majority in the lower house of parliament, the House of Representatives.

In the Senate, however, the discontent led to the election of candidates from an array of “other” parties, including three from right-wing mining magnate Clive Palmer's Palmer United Party, which campaigned on a populist platform that included such promises as boosting the level of aged pensions.

Some 23.5 percent of those who voted cast ballots against the three major parties, nearly double the 12 percent recorded in 2004, a decade earlier. As a result, the Abbott government holds only 33 seats in the 76-member Senate and needs to secure the votes of six other senators

to pass its bills, including key budget austerity measures.

In effect, there is another unstable “hung” parliament, only in a different form to the minority Labor government established with the support of the Greens after the 2010 election, which was the first minority government since World War II.

The unanimous committee report—consisting of MPs from the Coalition, Labor and the Greens, as well as “independent” senator Nick Xenophon—underscored the consensus within the political elite on shredding electoral rights to try to shore up the established order.

The report claimed that voters had been “confused” by the “creation of micro parties” that funnelled preference votes to each other. Then, in the name of cracking down on allegedly phony parties, it outlined plans to make it more difficult for any new parties to be formed or re-registered.

These provisions build on the already anti-democratic party registration system, first imposed by the Hawke Labor government in the 1980s, which forces parties to satisfy all its intrusive requirements, just to exercise the basic democratic right to have their names on ballot papers.

The proposals include:

- Trebling the number of officially recorded members required to obtain party registration from 500 to 1,500.
- Compelling all members to provide full contact details—residential and enrolled addresses, phone numbers, postal details and email addresses—and “membership joining particulars.”
- Requiring the Australian Electoral Commission to verify the particulars of each member—not just a sample as at present—probably by ordering every member to lodge a formal letter.
- Full “compliance audits” of registration requirements before every election.

Parties already represented in parliament will remain

exempt from these requirements, but all other parties will have to meet them. Far from avoiding “confusion,” the changes are designed to deny voters the essential democratic right to know the political affiliation of any candidates whose parties fail or refuse to comply.

Under the banner of requiring parties to prove “some minimal level of support to get on the ballot paper,” these rules make a mockery of the very idea of democratic elections, which are meant to give parties and candidates an equal opportunity to appeal for voters’ support.

In reality, the proposals aim to prevent the registration of parties without the substantial financial and logistical resources needed to comply with them.

For ordinary working people to be forced to divulge their party membership to a government agency is also a flagrant violation of their privacy and political rights, potentially exposing them to targeted surveillance and harassment by the government and its intelligence services.

In the committee hearings, one of the most vociferous advocates of the measures was Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) election analyst Anthony Green, who railed against the 50 percent increase in the number of registered parties during the lead-up to the election, and the “record” number of candidates.

The ABC’s poll expert repudiated any conception of people having the democratic right to form parties and contest elections under their banner. As far as Green was concerned, electoral rights are a privilege, not a right. He insisted that “registered parties have significant advantages in the system” and “therefore they should be forced to jump higher.”

Other proposed changes include requiring the submission of party constitutions that specify qualifications for membership, “how the party manages its internal affairs” and “free and democratic” pre-selection procedures for election candidates. These measures would further open up parties to state surveillance and override the rights of party members to decide for themselves how to nominate candidates.

On the Senate voting system, the committee called for the scrapping of “group tickets” by which parties direct the preference votes of those who vote for them. Instead, it recommended optional preferential voting, which would benefit the major parties. That is because voters’ preferences would only flow to parties that they specifically indicate. With scores of parties standing in Senate elections, many voters would fail to place a number in every party’s square. Their preferences would

be likely to be exhausted, unless they directed them to a major party.

When the report was released, Abbott’s government immediately indicated support for it. Since then, however, numbers of the new minor party senators elected last year, who assumed office on July 1, have denounced the Senate voting proposals, because they could wipe them out at the next election. The right-wing Liberal Democratic Party’s David Leyonhjelm warned that the suggestions would be adopted “over my dead body.”

This produced media speculation that the government would delay implementing the Senate voting changes, because it is desperate to win the votes of enough of the incoming senators to push through its deeply unpopular budget measures.

There has been no suggestion, though, that any of the new senators oppose the party registration proposals. Now that they have Senate seats, their parties are exempt from the requirements, just like the older establishment parties.

Over the past three decades, the more the political elite has become discredited in the eyes of millions of people, the more the existing parliamentary parties have ganged up together to try to shut out challengers. Just before the September 2013 election, the Labor government introduced new laws to erect greater barriers to alternative parties, including doubling the fees to nominate candidates (see: “Australian government imposes new anti-democratic electoral laws”).

In 2002, the jailing of right-wing nationalist politician Pauline Hanson on trumped-up electoral fraud charges demonstrated how these laws can also be used to lay the basis for serious criminal charges against any party that comes to be regarded as a threat to the political establishment (see: “Australia: Anti-democratic election laws behind trial of right-wing politicians”).

The bipartisan assault on voting and other political rights is part of a broader abrogation of basic legal and democratic rights. Successive governments have adopted increasingly repressive measures to silence the deepening popular opposition to their underlying program of austerity and preparations for war.



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