

Australian Labor leader moves bill on same-sex marriage

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There is no question that the ability of same-sex couples to marry is a basic democratic right and that all legal impediments to it should be removed.

But equally there is no question that Australian Labor Party leader Bill Shorten's private member's bill, introduced into the federal parliament yesterday, to make that possible has nothing to do with any fight for principle.

Rather, it is an attempt by Labor to give itself a "progressive" gloss as it deepens its collaboration with the Abbott Liberal government in its far-reaching onslaught on democratic rights under the guise of national security and the bogus "war on terror."

Shorten brought forward the bill following last month's Irish referendum, which endorsed same-sex marriage in that country. Its aim is both to boost Labor's stocks and head off a call by deputy Labor Party leader Tanya Plibersek to make support for same-sex marriage compulsory for all the party's MPs, ending the present policy of allowing a conscience vote.

Plibersek has said she will raise the issue at the party's national conference in July, arguing that Labor does not allow a conscience vote on other major issues of democratic rights and social policy, and nor should it on this question.

Introducing the bill, Shorten tried to invoke the social reforms initiated by the Whitlam Labor government of 1972–75. He declared that "It's time"—the slogan of the victorious 1972 campaign that ended 23 years of Liberal Party rule—for the legislation to be passed. "Let us delay no more. Let us make this a reality," Shorten declared to a half-empty chamber, with most of the Liberals and a considerable number of Labor MPs not in attendance.

With Labor lacking the numbers to push the issue,

and the Liberal Party refusing to allow a free vote on the question, the debate was quickly adjourned. There is a deal in the making, however. Government MP Warren Entsch, who has led the push for recognition of same-sex marriage within the Liberal Party, is negotiating with Labor for a cross-bench bill to enact marriage equality later in the year.

Labor's attempt to drape its stance as support for democratic rights is another expression of the hypocrisy that has become its stock in trade. Despite having the opportunity to do so, Labor made no move to legalise same-sex marriage during the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007–2013. Gillard specifically opposed such legislation.

Labor's latest move comes in the face of the support it has given, first in government and now in opposition, to deep-going attacks on democratic rights.

Under the Rudd and Gillard governments, Australia became a world leader in the persecution of refugees, attacks that have intensified under the Liberal government, with Labor's full support. Shorten has specifically refused to commit to any reversal of the Liberals' "turn back the boats" policy, which Abbott insists is the "model" European governments should seek to emulate to stop African refugees seeking sanctuary.

The Labor Party has marched in lockstep with the Abbott government's deployment of Australian troops to Iraq—with deputy leader Plibersek, the champion of the democratic right of same-sex marriage, insisting it bears no similarity to the 2003 invasion. The Labor opposition supported the government's orchestration of terror raids last September, backed the elevation of the Sydney Lindt Café siege by the mentally-deranged Man Haron Monis last December into an "ISIS attack" and backed all its reactionary "anti-terror" legislation.

The Abbott government's latest anti-democratic move, to revoke Australian citizenship for those who hold a dual nationality and possibly even for Australian-born citizens, was first mooted by the Greens-supported minority Labor government in 2013. Last week, Michelle Rowland, the party's citizenship spokeswoman, said Labor was "absolutely committed to doing everything in a bipartisan way to keep our citizens safe."

Appearing on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation program "Q&A" last night, Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese refused to take a position on the government's proposals, saying the party would need to see the legislation.

This bipartisanship goes beyond the issue of democratic rights. It extends to attacks being delivered against social rights, through the budget cutbacks to health, education, pensions and other social services. In his May 14 budget reply speech and in subsequent interviews, Shorten made clear that just as there was a "bipartisan approach on national security," so there should be one on major economic issues.

In order to cover up its ever-closer collaboration with the Liberals, Shorten has seized on same-sex marriage to try and establish a Labor point of difference.

The exploitation of this issue for the most reactionary purposes does not stop with the Labor Party. Last Saturday, *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Peter Hartcher published an article based on leaks from the cabinet discussion on the government's sweeping proposals to remove citizenship status.

His conclusion, however, was at complete variance with the assault on democratic rights reported in the article. The Abbott government, he claimed, was an active agent in the furthering of rights in Australia. "Gay rights, and particularly the right of homosexual people to marry in the law, is on the cusp of recognition in Australia. Abbott has yielded to the inevitability," he wrote.

Hartcher concluded by invoking a "rights revolution," of which the legal recognition of same-sex marriage was a part, as a weapon in the "war on terror." An Australia "united in advancing fairness and human rights," in a profound "repudiation of the barbarians who call themselves Islamic State," would truly be an "extraordinary proposition."

Opinion polls record that 70 percent of the population

are in favour of legalising same-sex marriage. That signifies an advance in social thinking and a decline in reactionary influences, such as the teachings of the churches. However marriage equality is far from a key question for large sections of the population; the attacks on jobs, health and other social right are of far greater importance.

However, same-sex marriage and questions of identity politics in general are of concern for relatively better-off sections of the upper-middle class. All sections of the political establishment would like to present themselves in "progressive" garb to these socio-economic layers. This is the underlying reason for the Pauline-like conversion of a number of MPs from both major parties on this issue, not any concern for democratic and social rights, which they are jointly attacking.



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