

Bipartisan push in Australia for four-year parliaments

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Australian Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten last Sunday called for a pact with the Liberal-National Coalition government to ensure that whichever party wins the next election will hold a referendum to introduce fixed four-year terms in office.

Soon after Shorten put up his proposal on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" program, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rang him to discuss it.

The prime minister's office later denied that Turnbull had given bipartisan support, but said he was interested in talking with Shorten about four-year terms, while noting there were many complications.

The proposal is a blatantly anti-democratic push to overcome widespread distrust, alienation and anger with the political elites. It is a bid to shore up the political establishment and strengthen its capacity to impose deeply unpopular policies, particularly austerity and preparations for war.

"We need both Labor and Liberal to co-operate on four-year terms," Shorten said. "Governments can be more daring and more determined if they're not constantly thinking about the next election. What this country needs is long-term policymaking."

By "more daring and more determined," Shorten means more ruthless in overriding working-class opposition in order to enforce the dictates of the corporate elite. Longer terms would bolster the capacity of governments to ride roughshod over popular opposition by avoiding electoral defeat for four years.

Mounting hostility toward the agenda of big business has been largely responsible for one short-lived government after another, both Labor and Coalition, over the past 10 years.

Since the landslide defeat of the decade-old Howard Coalition government in late 2007, no prime minister

has lasted three years. Labor's Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, and the Coalition's Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, have proven unable to carry through key cuts to education, health, welfare and other essential social programs.

At present, under the Constitution, parliaments are meant to be elected every three years, with the prime minister having the power to ask the governor-general for an early poll. On average, however, terms have lasted only two-and-a-half years.

To impose fixed four-year terms would require a referendum to amend the Constitution. To pass, a referendum would have to get a national majority, plus a majority in four of the six states. However, there is a long history of Australian referenda being defeated whenever they involved strengthening the powers of the capitalist state and its political servants.

In 1988, the Hawke Labor government, which imposed a sweeping pro-market restructuring of the economy with the backing of the trade unions, put a referendum for four-year terms for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Its bid was overwhelmingly defeated, gaining only 32.9 percent of the national vote and losing in every state.

Over the three decades since then, the level of support for the two traditional ruling parties has crumbled as they have delivered on the requirements of the giant companies and financial markets. That support sank to new historical lows last July, when Turnbull called a rare "double dissolution" election of all members of both houses.

Turnbull was trying to break the political impasse produced by the ongoing blocking of some 2013 budget measures by Senate "crossbenchers." These "third party" and "independent" members, mostly right-wing populists, refused to vote for the most egregious cuts to

health, education and welfare, fearing to do so would be electoral suicide.

The election backfired, however, reducing the Coalition to a fragile one-seat majority in the lower house and just 29 out of 76 seats in the Senate. Together, the two major parties polled just 65 percent of the vote for the Senate, a far cry from the 80 to 90 percent support they still obtained back in the 1980s. Despite the unpopularity of Turnbull's government, Labor's vote remained less than 30 percent.

Media and political commentators endorsed Shorten's call for bipartisan backing for a referendum, agreeing that a common front was necessary to win a majority. In reality, a Labor-Coalition unity ticket would only intensify the widespread hostility toward them.

Equally delusional is the thought that a four-year term would resolve the underlying political crisis. Public opposition will erupt outside the parliamentary channels, aggravating the instability of the political establishment.

For this reason there is nervousness in ruling circles about the proposal. "People are disenchanted with the major parties," the *Australian* warned in a July 25 editorial. "In the present climate, voters are hardly going to support a measure that looks like making politicians less accountable to the verdict of the electorate."

Any referendum also would involve trying to reduce the capacity of the Senate to block austerity measures. Senators are currently elected for six years, with only half facing election at the end of each three-year term (except for "double dissolution" elections). Any proposal by Shorten and Turnbull would halve senators' terms to four years, or else extend them to eight.

For years, the Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest companies operating in the country, has agitated for four-year terms. Soon after Shorten made his proposal, BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott declared the council was "broadly in favour."

Westacott linked this backing directly to the demand for "economic reform"—a euphemism for further gutting social spending, cutting taxes for companies and the wealthy, driving down wage levels and dismantling working conditions.

"Although governments have undertaken serious economic reform within the constraints of a three-year political cycle, the demands of the 24/7 media cycle appear to be making this harder to achieve," Westacott said. "I hope longer fixed terms would encourage governments to broaden their horizon and move away from the short-term thinking that is holding our country back."

Westacott's comments were quickly backed by a leader of Labor's "Left" faction, Senator Doug Cameron, a former national secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. Cameron said the BCA had identified "short-termism" as one of the key problems facing the economy. "One of the ways you get away from short-termism is to have a four-year term," he told Sky News. "And that gives you the capacity to actually push good, long-term policies."

These remarks are a warning. Labor is making a pitch for the formation of a Labor government that will be pledged to emulate the Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996 in imposing the requirements of global capital.

With the assistance of the unions, the Labor leaders are seeking to channel the deepening opposition to Turnbull's crisis-racked and unstable Coalition government behind the return of another vicious pro-business Labor government.

Shorten's call for four-year terms points to this being the real agenda behind his recent populist rhetoric opposing the ever-widening social inequality. While posturing as opponents of corporate greed, Labor is declaring its intent to not just replace Turnbull's shaky government but bolster the parliamentary order itself.



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