

Murdoch media widens citizenship witch-hunt in Australian parliament

Mike Head
28 July 2017

The Rupert Murdoch-owned *Australian* today broadened the reactionary campaign underway to oust from the federal parliament any members who may be dual citizens of Australia and another country.

Under the front-page headline, “MP fiasco extends to bloodlines,” the newspaper published a list of 21 members of the House of Representatives who have in the past “spoken of their migrant heritage” and therefore potentially could be disqualified from sitting in parliament.

Murdoch’s national flagship suggested that the witch-hunt could bring down the Liberal-National Coalition government, which has clung to office over the past year with a wafer-thin majority of one seat in the lower house.

The *Australian* article reported that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten “are preparing for a battle over more than 20 MPs facing questions about possible citizenship rights in foreign countries, in a widening crisis that could tip the balance of power in federal parliament.”

The furore over “foreign” citizenship began in murky circumstances earlier this month. Two Greens senators abruptly resigned from parliament, without a fight, because they were born overseas and unwittingly acquired dual citizenship. The “fiasco” is now intensifying the political instability produced by the growing collapse of popular support for the major parties.

The newspaper’s list of 21 MPs included Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, Trade Minister Steven Ciobo and deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek. The article said MPs were now “vulnerable” if they had “at least one parent or grandparent born overseas,” because they “could be entitled to foreign citizenship by descent.”

The campaign widened after this week’s resignation of National Party cabinet minister Senator Matt Canavan. He revealed he had acquired Italian citizenship from his Italian-born mother. Canavan quit as resources minister,

but declined to vacate his Senate seat, claiming to know nothing about his mother registering him as an Italian citizen.

Also in the immediate firing line is Malcolm Roberts, elected to the Senate last July for Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant One Nation. He was born in India and may have British citizenship. Questions have been raised about other senators, including Assistant Minister for Social Services and Multicultural Affairs Zed Seselja, whose parents are Croatian, Australian Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale, who has an Italian family background, and two further Greens senators—Nick McKim, who was born in Britain, and Peter Whish-Wilson, born in Singapore.

Disqualified senators can be replaced by recounting the votes from last July’s election, which may mean their parties retain their seats. But if lower house MPs are barred, by-elections must be conducted. Any resulting losses in the Coalition’s ranks could topple the government because of its single-seat majority.

Canavan will challenge his potential disqualification in the High Court, the country’s supreme court—a process that could take months. Because of previous rulings by the court, legal experts say he is likely to be stripped of his seat under section 44(i) of the Constitution.

That sub-section declares “incapable” of sitting in parliament anyone who “is under any acknowledgment of allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power, or is a subject or a citizen **or** entitled to the rights or privileges of a subject or a citizen of a foreign power” [emphasis added].

The final clause extends the ban beyond anyone who is actually a dual citizen of another country to anyone “entitled” to citizenship. For some countries, such as Italy and the United Kingdom, children and even grandchildren of citizens may be entitled to citizenship. In other countries, citizenship is automatically acquired by birth,

and may be practically impossible to renounce.

The sweeping anti-democratic nature of this prohibition can be seen in the fact that half the population was born overseas or had a parent who was born overseas. It has become common for people to seek dual citizenship in order to travel or work internationally despite nationally-imposed restrictions. As a result, 12 million people or more may be disqualified from standing for election.

The 2016 Census reported that 49 percent of all Australians were born elsewhere or have at least one foreign-born parent. Australia has always been an immigrant country but is increasingly so in today's ever-more globalised world. Nearly 7 million residents—28.5 percent of the population—were born overseas. Fifty years ago, the figure was only 18 percent.

Like the Constitution as a whole, section 44 is a British colonial-era relic, imposed in 1901. Section 44 is just one of many anti-democratic provisions in a document that contains no bill of rights and does not even mention the right to vote. Ironically, in 1901 there was no concept of Australian citizenship—instead the populations of Australia and other parts of the British Empire, including India, Canada and New Zealand, were classified as “subjects” of the British monarchy.

Yet this archaic provision is now being brought to centre stage, both to whip up nationalist sentiment and create a potential vehicle to remove politicians, and possibly governments, via legal challenges and court rulings.

A July 27 *Australian* editorial attacked calls to reform or repeal section 44(i). “The obligation for federal parliamentarians to have undivided and unquestioned loyalties is a reasonable one,” it declared. “A national parliament that deals in foreign affairs, treaties, trade and defence is no place for people with loyalties, rights or even obligations in other nations.”

Another sub-section of section 44 declares ineligible anyone who “holds any office of profit under the Crown.” In several contentious judgments, the High Court has interpreted this provision so broadly that it is regarded as barring federal and state public sector workers, school teachers, university staff and public hospital doctors and nurses.

The Greens became the first victims of the anti-foreigner crusade when Greens senators Scott Ludlam and Larissa Waters resigned from parliament after discovering they had dual citizenship because they were born in New Zealand and Canada, respectively.

Despite several Greens' senators remaining under

doubt, Greens leader Di Natale yesterday stepped forward to intensify the anti-democratic campaign. He demanded that all federal politicians be compelled to provide documents about their citizenship. Di Natale wrote to the Senate president and House of Representatives speaker calling for an investigation to “immediately establish” the eligibility of all 226 members of parliament. This is in keeping with the nationalist politics of the Greens, who have always lined up behind the defence of the interests of Australian capitalism, including its military interventions in the Asia-Pacific.

So far this year, an unprecedented number of MPs—four in total—have been disqualified under various parts of section 44 of the Constitution. Another two are facing High Court proceedings and three more narrowly avoided it after facing contempt of court charges.

These developments are a further indicator of the mounting instability of parliamentary rule produced by the widening gulf between the entire political establishment and the needs and basic rights of the vast majority of the population. Over the past decade, as inequality and attacks on jobs and living standards have escalated, support for the major parties has crumbled and no Australian prime minister has lasted three years. Less than a year since the 2016 election, Turnbull's government is rent by factional conflicts.

A possible outcome of the sinister campaign over citizenship is that the Coalition could lose its majority, resulting in either the calling of a crisis election or an unstable minority Labor Party government being formed on the floor of parliament.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact