

Australian government staves off crisis over marriage equality

Mike Head
8 August 2017

An emergency “special” meeting of members of federal parliament from the ruling Liberal Party yesterday averted, for now, a split and the possible fall of the Turnbull government over the issue of same-sex marriage.

Liberal MPs were summoned to Canberra a day before today’s resumption of parliament after a six-week winter recess. The urgency and timing of the meeting reflect the fact that the divisions over marriage equality are bound up with deeper and broader rifts wracking the fragile government and the entire parliamentary establishment.

Despite days of speculation that Liberal backbench supporters of gay marriage would potentially cross the floor of parliament and vote for a supposed marriage equality bill, only seven MPs reportedly spoke in favour of such a bill during yesterday’s closed-door meeting.

After a two-hour session, the majority of MPs decided to stick with the government’s current policy of delaying any legislation on this basic legal and democratic right by again trying to push a bill through the Senate for a compulsory national plebiscite.

If, as seems almost certain, the Senate again rejects such a plebiscite, like it did last November, the government is threatening to conduct a voluntary postal plebiscite. This would be legally non-binding, unreliable and open to bias and rigging. According to legal experts, such a ballot would be illegal also without legislation to specifically authorise it.

The government cannot afford defections on this, or any other issue, because it holds only a one-seat majority in the House of Representatives and just 29 of the 76 seats in the Senate after last year’s double dissolution election called by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Even though the opposition Labor Party declared it would not treat a vote against the government on gay marriage as a no-confidence motion that could bring down the government, such a vote could let loose the wider tensions tearing the government apart.

The lead-up to the meeting saw warnings by socially conservative Liberals, supporters of former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and members of the National Party, the Liberals’ rural-based coalition partner, that any move for a free “conscience” vote in parliament would trigger a split with the Nationals and moves to oust Turnbull.

National Party MP Andrew Broad made the threats public. He told the *Sunraysia Daily*: “If the Liberals come out with a conscience vote, it won’t be me only, the whole show would blow up ... Turnbull’s leadership would become untenable and he’d no longer be prime minister. They’d push for [immigration minister] Peter Dutton or [health minister] Greg Hunt as leader and deputy leader or we’d be going to a general election.”

Despite such threats, the issue remains fraught and the outcome unpredictable. One of the seven Liberal MPs supporting a conscience vote—Warren Entsch—has threatened to re-open the divisions by introducing a private same-sex marriage bill into parliament if the Senate rejects a plebiscite.

Reportedly, however, a number of concerns were ventilated during the meeting about a postal vote. Speaking before the meeting, another gay marriage bill proponent, Senator Dean Smith, branded a postal vote “a D-grade response to what is a defining A-grade social issue.”

Marriage equality is an elementary issue of democratic rights that should have been recognised long ago. Same-sex couples and their children face discriminatory limitations on the rights afforded to

married couples in areas such as inheritance, parenthood, adoption, guardianship and health care benefits. Media polls show two-thirds backing for marriage equality, with higher levels of support among young people.

However, the bill proposed by Entsch and Smith—the “marriage amendment (definition and religious freedoms) bill”—would still deny equality by pandering to the homophobic prejudices of religious fundamentalists and others. It would allow ministers of religion, military chaplains and a new category of “independent religious celebrants” to refuse to marry couples on grounds of sex, sexuality and family status. Bodies established for religious purposes could legally refuse to provide facilities, goods or services.

The impasse over same-sex marriage is just one expression of an intensifying crisis over the past decade that has confronted successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, none of which have lasted a full three-year term. At the heart of the divisions that have torn through each government since the 2008 global financial breakdown is the question of how to impose on an increasingly disaffected and hostile population the agenda of austerity and militarism demanded by the corporate elite.

Millions of working class people are experiencing the destruction of full-time jobs, falling real wages, soaring prices for housing, utilities and other essentials, and deteriorating schools, healthcare and other social services. At the same time, big business is demanding a far deeper social assault.

The *Australian* today reported that spending cuts and tax levies in the government’s May budget worth at least \$12 billion over the next four years could become “zombie measures,” blocked in the Senate. These include a 2.5 percent Medicare levy to raise \$8.2 billion, random drug testing of welfare recipients, and tertiary education cuts of \$3.7 billion.

The reference to “zombie measures” recalls the cuts to education, health and welfare that the Coalition government, then led by Abbott, failed to push through the Senate from the 2014 and 2015 budgets. Now, as then, the Labor, Greens and “crossbench” senators, mainly right-wing populists, are terrified of committing electoral suicide themselves if they vote for the measures.

There are no real differences in the political

establishment on slashing social spending in order to impose the burden of the underlying economic crisis on the working class. But the rifts on gay marriage reflect divisions over how to achieve that end.

Abbott and the social conservatives are competing with Senator Corey Bernardi’s breakaway Australian Conservatives and Senator Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in trying to mobilise religious forces. They are also appealing to anti-immigrant chauvinism, nationalism and militarism in a similar vein to Donald Trump in the US, as a means of diverting the immense social discontent in reactionary directions.

MPs like Smith and Entsch, who have taken up the marriage equality issue, represent right-wing, pro-business elements who are seeking to build a base of support among so-called progressive upper-middle layers on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and other forms of identity.

By declaring support for a marriage equality bill, Labor and the Greens are making a similar pitch. Hypocrisy abounds all round. Worried by opposition from Labor’s own social conservatives, the last Greens-backed minority Labor government also blocked same-sex marriage calls from 2010 to 2013. This helped prop up Prime Minister Julia Gillard as her government deepened cuts to education and other social programs and ramped up the attack on refugees.

Now Labor leader Bill Shorten, a key Gillard minister, is claiming to be both a champion of gay rights and an opponent of social inequality. A Labor-led government would be no less intent on imposing the requirements of the corporate elite, regardless of whether it enacted marriage equality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact