

Australian government orders sham postal “survey” on same-sex marriage

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11 August 2017

As part of an escalating political crisis, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government has ordered an unprecedented, anti-democratic and probably illegal postal ballot on same-sex marriage. The measure has been taken in a desperate bid to stave off splits in the Liberal-National Coalition on the issue.

Turnbull and his ministers announced the ballot on Wednesday, immediately after the Senate rejected, for the second time, the government’s bill for a national plebiscite on same-sex marriage. Unable to command a parliamentary majority for its plebiscite bill, the Liberal-National Coalition government is trying to achieve the same ends by under-handed means.

Growing calls are being made to boycott the ballot, while yesterday two High Court challenges were launched to halt it, via urgent interlocutory injunctions, potentially for months, until its legality can be tested.

The non-binding postal vote, now officially being called a “survey,” is a fraud on every level—politically, legally and organisationally. Like the abandoned plebiscite, it has nothing to do with the long-overdue recognition of the basic legal and democratic right of all couples to marry, regardless of gender. On the contrary, it amounts to another blatant effort to stymie the accelerating popular demand for marriage equality.

Even if a majority votes “yes” for the designated question—“Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?”—the government has refused to be bound by the result. If, however, a majority votes “no,” the government has already ruled out permitting any marriage equality bill to be put before the parliament for a vote.

Not only is the postal ballot being launched to delay a parliamentary vote on the issue; it is designed to pander to the most right-wing, socially conservative elements in the Coalition and let loose the homophobic and

religious fundamentalist social base on which they rest.

Already, the airwaves are being polluted by bigoted taunts against same-sex couples, accusing them of “abuse and neglect” of their children. One pamphlet asserts that their children are more likely to use drugs, be unemployed and suffer depression.

Turnbull has given the green light for this campaign, declaring: “We’re not going to shut down democracy and debate because people here or there say outrageous things or defamatory things.”

The prime minister is insisting, for the sake of his “progressive” electoral pitch to mainly upper-middle class layers, that he will vote “yes.” But he says he will not actively campaign for a “yes” vote. By contrast, Tony Abbott, the man Turnbull ousted as prime minister in 2015, has thrown himself into the fray, absurdly alleging that marriage equality is a threat to religious freedom and free speech.

Turnbull and key ministers from the socially conservative camp that devised the postal plan, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, are anxious to conduct the ballot within weeks, in order to avert divisions that could bring down Turnbull’s increasingly fragile government. It holds just a one-seat majority in the House of Representatives and only 29 of the 76 Senate seats.

Their proposed “survey,” to be conducted between September 12 and November 15, would be unreliable, unrepresentative and open to manipulation and abuse. It would be far less accurate than the numerous surveys, some government-funded, conducted in recent times, all showing 60–70 percent support for marriage equality.

The ballot would particularly disenfranchise young people—many of whom are unfamiliar with the postal

system, or are not on the electoral rolls—as well as indigenous and other people living in remote locations, or those living or travelling overseas, or who have moved house since the last election.

Supposedly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), acting on the government's instructions, would post voting papers to all citizens on the electoral roll, requiring them to mail them back. Not only would ballots inevitably go astray; there would be no means to guarantee that the votes were cast by those to whom the letters were sent.

If ballots included personal identifiers, in order to prevent manipulation, the ABS would then be able to match respondents' opinions on same-sex marriage with other personal information, violating the concept of a secret vote.

There is no precedent for such an operation. The government claims that it has validity because in 1974, the Whitlam government instructed the ABS to conduct a phone survey of 60,000 randomly selected people about a new national anthem. But Turnbull's postal ballot bears no relation to that phone survey, politically or logistically.

Moreover, the bill proposed this week by five Liberal Party backbenchers, in the event that the process produces a "yes" vote, would allow ministers of religion, military chaplains and "independent religious celebrants" to refuse to marry couples on grounds of sex, sexuality and family status. Other entities could legally refuse to provide facilities, goods or services.

Labor and the Greens, despite criticising the flaws in the postal vote, are imploring voters not to boycott it, thus giving it political legitimacy. They are pleading for young people to put themselves on the electoral rolls to participate, ostensibly as a means of ensuring a "yes" majority, in order to channel popular outrage over the ballot back into the parliamentary framework.

Speaking with feigned passion in parliament yesterday, Labor leader Bill Shorten said he would hold Turnbull responsible for "every hurtful bit of filth this debate will unleash." Yet, he urged people: "Get your name on the electoral roll today, make your voice heard."

Likewise, Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale declared: "We are hoping that the shonky postal plebiscite is knocked off by the upcoming court challenges, but you'll want to be on the roll in case it

isn't."

This is sheer hypocrisy. The last Labor government—in which Shorten was a senior minister and with which the Greens formed a de facto coalition—effectively blocked same-sex marriage bills from 2007 to 2013. Like Turnbull, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard appeased the religious right wing in Labor's own parliamentary ranks, in order to cling to office as her government imposed its rightwing agenda of austerity and war.

Legal experts have indicated that the High Court challenges could well succeed. One application lists seven grounds of objection. They include the lack of any legislation to authorise the \$122 million ballot, violation of the legislation covering the ABS, which confines it to collecting "statistics," not opinions, and the use of ministerial directions and regulations to bypass parliament.

Regardless of the law suits, working people and youth should take no part in this sham. Its primary political purpose is to hold together a government and an entire parliamentary set-up that is preparing to join a US-led war against North Korea and China, and deepen the assault on the working class. Millions of people are already 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.

The fight for basic democratic rights, such as marriage equality, can only be taken forward through the independent political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist perspective, against the ruling elite and its political servants, who are increasingly tearing up basic legal and democratic rights across the board in preparation for suppressing widespread social unrest.



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