

The dual citizenship furore in the Australian parliament: What is at stake for the working class?

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A nationalist witch-hunt against members of the Australian parliament, who hold, or are simply entitled to hold, dual citizenship of another country, has plunged Canberra into its greatest constitutional crisis in over 40 years. In true McCarthyite fashion, seven politicians already face High Court hearings on the extraordinary grounds that they have “allegiance to a foreign power.”

The High Court, a reactionary institution with a history of endorsing the stripping away of fundamental democratic rights, will decide whether the seven are eligible to sit in parliament. The most prominent figure referred to the court so far is Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, upon whose fate the Liberal-National Coalition government’s one-seat majority in the lower house depends.

The referrals to the High Court have been justified by Australia’s arcane 1901 constitution. Section 44 (i) proscribes anyone from standing for parliament who has “allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power” or is “entitled” to the “rights and privileges of a foreign power.” In 1992, the court set a precedent. It ruled that dual citizenship amounted to “allegiance” and that two candidates in an election were ineligible to stand for parliament because they had failed to take “reasonable steps” to renounce their foreign citizenship.

Twenty-five years later, that precedent has been seized upon to investigate the backgrounds of federal politicians. It was virtually inevitable that some would fall foul of scrutiny. Due to large-scale migration since World War II, an estimated 50 percent of the Australian population holds or is entitled to hold dual citizenship—often without being conscious of it—because they were born overseas or a parent, grandparent or even great-grandparent was born overseas. As many as a dozen more politicians could be referred to the court, before the witch-hunt has finished working through its potential victims.

The vendetta over dual citizenship has been labelled a “farce” in the establishment media, and the outcome of the “incompetence” of politicians who have failed to ascertain their status. There is certainly an element of the absurd in the campaign, given that the politicians involved have lived all or most of their lives in Australia. But, if it were simply a farce, why is it being pursued with such vigour by the media and political establishment, even though it is further destabilising an already unstable parliamentary system? And why have none of the major parties even suggested that the constitution be amended or that fundamental democratic rights are at stake?

As the events have unfolded, the underlying reasons for this deeply anti-democratic witch-hunt, and its serious implications for the working class, have come into sharper focus. Under conditions of immense war tensions internationally, tremendous economic uncertainty and rising class antagonisms, it is being used to amplify a decades-long effort to divert and disorientate the population through nationalism and xenophobia.

The demand for unquestioned “allegiance” on the part of the parliamentary servants of the capitalist state is intended as a benchmark for implementation throughout society. Anyone who opposes the policies of the government will be labelled “un-Australian,” a servant of foreign interests, or, under conditions of war, downright treasonous.

Finally, the prospect of the High Court throwing out elected politicians has far-reaching implications. The unelected governor-general could be used to call new elections, under conditions of dissatisfaction and frustration in ruling class circles with the Coalition government’s inability to pass legislation through the parliament. The aim of any change of government would be to facilitate a further political lurch to the right, including full and uncritical support for the US alliance and its criminal wars, deeper austerity cutbacks and a greater assault on democratic rights.

Behind the citizenship furore

The constitutional crisis is an expression of the same processes that have led to political upheavals in country after country. Amid the economic failure of world capitalism, parliamentary democracy is breaking down under the stresses of ever-widening social inequality and growing trade and geo-strategic tensions between the world’s major powers.

As in the US, the UK, France and elsewhere, election after election in Australia has demonstrated the growing alienation of millions of people from the two-party political system. Since 2007, government has changed hands three times—compared with twice in the preceding 24 years. As popular support for the major parties evaporates, official politics has degenerated into factional intrigue, muck-raking and conspiracy. In the past seven years, three elected prime ministers have been ousted by their own party before even completing a term in office. Just one year since the 2016 election, there is rampant speculation that a factional move will be made inside the Liberal Party against Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Under conditions of unprecedented political disaffection, the ruling elite is terrified of an explosion of class struggle, as economic conditions deteriorate and social distress becomes unbearable. After decades of economic restructuring, privatisations and public spending cuts under successive Labor and Coalition governments, the lives of millions of workers are dominated by stagnant wages, insecure employment and deteriorating services.

The ruling class and its political parties are just as fearful of a mass working-class movement against the US-Australia alliance and the rising danger of war. Since 2010, under constant pressure from Washington, successive governments have committed to supporting US imperialism as

it prepares for a military confrontation with China. As part of this commitment, tens of billions of dollars have been directed into military spending, while US military forces are operating across the country in a manner not seen since World War II.

Now, both the ruling Coalition and Labor opposition have vowed to join a US-led war against North Korea, which could involve nuclear weapons and would vastly intensify antagonisms between the US and China.

The promotion of nationalism

Amid the immense dangers of a nuclear war, the citizenship crisis is an attempt to suppress anti-war sentiment and class tensions by promoting nationalism and patriotism. It follows a decades-long campaign by the political establishment to divide the working class by promoting vicious anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner xenophobia.

Since 2001, the fraudulent “war on terror” has been used to demonise the Muslim community and justify wars overseas and a wholesale assault on fundamental legal and democratic rights. Desperate refugees have been vilified and made the target of draconian military operations to prevent them reaching Australia. Those asylum seekers who do make it into the country are treated worse than stray dogs.

The Labor Party and the trade unions have increasingly resorted to protectionism, chauvinistically denouncing “foreign workers” and trade agreements, especially with China, for threatening “Australian jobs,” in order to cover up their own direct responsibility for plant closures and job destruction.

While Australia’s decades-long alliance with the US is constantly lauded, the media has launched a propaganda campaign against “Chinese influence.” Over the past year, media-driven “investigations” have vilified political and business figures, Chinese-born Australians and Chinese students studying in the country as a potential fifth column of the Chinese “communist” regime. At the same time, the government has blocked Chinese investments on the grounds of “national security.”

In the weeks before the citizenship furore, the Coalition government used the purported threat of terrorism to unveil sweeping new measures to foster Australian patriotism. In June, it proposed legislation to compel new citizens to formally pledge “allegiance” to Australia, pass a university-level English-language exam and sit a “values test” to demonstrate that they upheld “community standards and laws” and had “integrated” into Australian society.

Turnbull declared in parliament: “We should make no apology for asking those who seek to join our Australian family to join us as Australian patriots—committed to the values that define us, committed to the values that unite us.” Weeks later, the government announced the creation of a new super security ministry; a centralised intelligence command working directly under the prime minister; the expansion of military call-out powers to deal with civilian unrest, and greater Internet monitoring.

It is entirely lawful that the nationalist hysteria against foreign dangers has been subsequently extended into the parliament. Australian imperialism is preparing for war abroad and class war at home, and cannot allow even the most limited avenues for political dissent and opposition.

The Australian ruling class has a particularly foul record of suppressing real or potential sources of opposition to imperialist war. The outbreaks of World War I and World War II were followed almost immediately by the internment of thousands of people who had migrated from “enemy” countries. Socialist and working-class organisations that opposed the wars were illegalised and denounced as traitors and enemy agents. Industrial action by workers that disrupted the war effort was likewise denounced as

treason and subjected to brutal repression.

The accusations being widely made in the political and media establishment today, such as “allegiance to a foreign power,” “agents of Chinese influence” and “un-Australian,” recall these chapters in Australian history.

The political independence of the working class

The working class cannot afford to remain a passive bystander to this unfolding political crisis. The aim of what is taking place is to prepare the conditions for the wholesale repression of opposition to war and to ever-deeper attacks on the social and democratic rights of workers and young people.

The working class must intervene against the entire political establishment and the profit system it defends, on the basis of its own, independent class interests and with its own anti-capitalist, socialist and internationalist program. It cannot rely upon any faction of the pro-capitalist parliamentary establishment, or on the trade unions. None defends democratic and social rights. They have all fallen in behind the stoking of right-wing nationalism to further divide and disorientate the population.

Workers and youth need to draw the necessary political conclusions from the particularly grotesque manner in which self-styled “progressive” and “left” organisations have stepped forward as nationalist advocates of purging politicians for their “allegiance to a foreign power.”

Draping himself in the Australian flag, Greens’ leader Richard Di Natale has spearheaded demands for an “audit” to compel every politician to prove that he or she had repudiated any possible entitlement to dual citizenship before being elected. The Greens instructed two of its senators to publicly apologise for not knowing they held citizenship in New Zealand and Canada, and to resign immediately, before they were even referred to the High Court.

In an August 28 article in *Red Flag*, the pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative aligned itself completely with the reactionary citizenship clause of the constitution. Combining nationalism, opportunism and complacency, Socialist Alternative is deliberately covering up the motives behind the witch-hunt and its consequences for the working class.

The article’s author, Louise O’Shea, wrote: “... now that this quiet achieving piece of constitutional law looks set to bring down a conservative government, I’m starting to warm to it. It’s not just that section 44 has managed to achieve what the combined might of the socialist movement, Labor Party and the unions haven’t: the probable demise of the reactionary Turnbull government. It’s also that its rigorous enforcement is setting some exciting legal precedents.”

Having adapted completely to the capitalist state and its constitution, she then changed tack, to treat the parliamentary crisis as nothing but a joke. “All in all,” she concluded, “I’ve never held any section of the Constitution in higher regard than section 44. I’m even thinking of getting it framed and hung on the wall. I’ll be sad to see it go when full democratic rights are eventually achieved in Australia.”

The stance taken by the Greens and Socialist Alternative confirms that the defining feature of middle-class politics is its lack of independence from the ruling class. Any organisation that is prepared to align itself with the High Court to determine the composition of the parliament is reactionary. In hailing the utterly anti-democratic constitution, Socialist Alternative makes clear that there is nothing it will not accept if it suits its immediate opportunist aims, including the use of other bourgeois institutions, such as the governor-general, to shut down parliament

altogether and institute rule through authoritarian methods.

The only party that fights for the revolutionary perspective of socialist internationalism as the only means for advancing the interests of the working class is the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP's program is the fight for a workers' government that will end the ANZUS military alliance and all military deployments, expropriate the banks and major corporations and place them under public ownership and democratic control, abolish immigrant controls and citizenship criteria, and reorganise society to provide for the social and democratic rights of all.

We urge all those workers and young people searching for a means to fight against the capitalist system and the danger of war to apply to join the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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