Australia: Socialist Alternative supports nationalist witch-hunt over dual citizenship

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The value of any crisis is that it strips away superficial appearances and reveals the essential class character of political parties.

The present xenophobic campaign over Australian parliamentarians eligible for dual citizenship has demonstrated the willingness of Socialist Alternative to fall into line with the most reactionary traditions of Australian nationalism, including the country's archaic and anti-democratic constitution.

For the past two months, the Australian political establishment and the corporate press have been gripped by a McCarthyite witch-hunt, aimed at identifying federal politicians who are ineligible to sit in parliament, because they hold, or are entitled to hold, dual citizenship.

The furore began in July when it emerged that two federal Greens Senators, Scott Ludlam and Larissa Waters, had breached Section 44 of the Australian constitution—which forbids federal representatives from holding "allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power"—because they were unwittingly dual citizens. Both immediately resigned, expressing their support for this anti-democratic provision.

Socialist Alternative, a pseudo-left organisation that maintains close ties with sections of the Greens, initially responded with an article on August 1, titled, "Demanding loyalty to the state is always reactionary." The article denounced Section 44 as "anti-democratic" and called for it to be "banished, not bolstered."

However, as the campaign broadened, and the eligibility of growing numbers of politicians was called into question, Socialist Alternative did a 180-degree about-face. With the matter due to be adjudicated in the High Court, it hailed Section 44 because it appeared that the crisis could bring down the Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

An article by Louise O'Shea on August 31 was headlined: "Section 44: what's not to like?" The article was written in a complacent, unserious and flippant tone, which paralleled the attempts of some corporate media outlets to trivialise the citizenship issue and cover up its serious implications for the working class.

The article began: "Until very recently, section 44 of the Constitution just seemed like any other archaic anti-democratic measure designed to ensure that only the most respectable and patriotic among the bourgeoisie ever made it into parliament."

O'Shea continued: "But now that this quiet achieving piece of constitutional law looks set to bring down a conservative government, I'm starting to warm to it... 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."

The article concluded with extraordinary praise for the reactionary constitution: "All in all, 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."

Socialist Alternative's attitude to fundamental democratic rights is based on immediate political expediency—the possible removal of the Turnbull government—and expresses its complete indifference to the consequences for the working class.

While the Coalition government is one of war and austerity, workers and youth cannot be indifferent to how it is removed from office. Whatever the High Court finally decides, the furore over dual citizenship is being exploited to whip up patriotic fervour and shift official politics even further to the right amid a deepening economic crisis of Australian and world capitalism, and acute war tensions in Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, the Turnbull government is in power mainly

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because of broad disenchantment among workers and youth with Labor. In government, Labor implemented the same reactionary agenda as the Coalition—with the backing of the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative. A new Labor government would only deepen the inroads into the social position of the working class and integrate Australia even more closely into the US drive to war.

Socialist Alternative's support for Section 44 and the High Court demonstrates there is no line it will not cross.

O'Shea welcomes the prospect that the High Court will rule that prominent ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, were ineligible to sit in parliament. In other words, Socialist Alternative is backing the "right" of the capitalist state to determine the fate of democratically-elected politicians and even the government.

The High Court has been involved in all the attacks on democratic rights. It has rubber-stamped the brutal persecution of refugees, and endorsed "anti-terror" legislation that has handed the police and intelligence agencies powers to detain people without charge, outlaw organisations and conduct virtually limitless spying operations.

The anti-democratic character of section 44 is underscored by the fact that Australia is a nation of immigrants. Around half the population either holds, or is entitled to hold, dual citizenship and, as a consequence, is ineligible to stand for parliament.

The ferocious campaign against holding "allegiance to a foreign power" inevitably will be extended more broadly. If the ruling class and the capitalist state are prepared to discipline their trusted political representatives in this fashion, how will they respond to mounting opposition from the working class to war, austerity and the erosion of democratic rights?

The political establishment has already provided the answer.

The storm over dual citizenship was preceded by a hysterical campaign spearheaded by the corporate press, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the major parties against supposed Chinese "interference" in Australian politics and virtually every area of life. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has called for its sweeping powers of detention and interrogation without charge to be extended to root out "agents of foreign influence."

Amid the growing danger of a US-led war on the Korean Peninsula and escalating confrontation with China, the dual citizenship campaign is aimed at creating a climate where any opposition to war or defence of social and democratic rights will be branded as unpatriotic or treasonous. Workers who take strike action will be denounced as "un-Australian" and measures will be taken, including through the courts, to suppress them.

As it prepares for military conflict and class war, the ruling class is digging into the most reactionary traditions of Australian nationalism. During the two world wars of the 20th century, governments illegalised socialist and anti-war organisations, banned strikes and protests and interned hundreds of thousands of "enemy aliens."

Socialist Alternative's willingness to support the whipping up of Australian patriotism does not come out of the blue. Along with the rest of the pseudo-left, it has already emerged as a vociferous proponent of the US-led regime-change operations in Libya and Syria, which are part of Washington's escalating confrontation with Russia and China.

Socialist Alternative is part of the conspiracy of silence surrounding Australia's central role in the vast US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region, initiated by the Obama administration, with the backing of the Labor government propped up by the Greens. To the extent that Socialist Alternative has referenced the danger of conflict, it has cast it in terms of supposed "Chinese expansionism"—a position that aligns with the US State Department's attempts to present Washington's reckless war-mongering as a defensive response.

Socialist Alternative's support for the nationalist campaign over dual citizenship is a sharp warning that the layers of the upper middle class for which it speaks—centred on the trade unions, academia and the so-called liberal media—are shifting rapidly to the right. They will line up behind the capitalist state as it seeks to suppress any opposition to war, militarism and attacks on basic social and democratic rights.

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