

Citizenship witch-hunt escalates after Australian government loses majority

James Cogan

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Under a deal struck today between Australia's two main political parties—the governing Liberal-National Coalition and the opposition Labor Party—every member of parliament must produce “evidence” by December 1 that they do not hold, or are entitled to, citizenship in another country. The declaration must cover entitlement by birth or via descent from parents and even grandparents.

The agreement takes a months-long nationalist witch-hunt to a new stage. John Alexander, a Liberal Party member of the House of Representatives, parliament's lower house, resigned on Saturday because he “may” hold dual citizenship in Britain. On November 1, Liberal Senator Stephen Parry, the president of the upper house, resigned for the same reason.

On October 27, the High Court ruled that four senators and one lower house member—Deputy Prime Minister and National Party leader Barnaby Joyce—were ineligible to stand in the 2016 federal election because they held dual citizenship. The court enforced the most literal interpretation of the 1901 Constitution, which proscribes anyone from standing for parliament if they hold “allegiance” to a “foreign power” or are “entitled” to the “rights and privileges of a foreign power.”

After the ousting of Joyce and Alexander, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Coalition government no longer has a majority in the House of Representatives.

Until by-elections are held for the vacant seats, the Coalition has 74 seats and the Labor opposition 69. The remaining five seats are held by the “crossbench” independents and minor parties. The government can pass legislation, and survive a no confidence motion, only with at least one crossbencher's support.

A crisis of far-reaching dimensions has developed. Desperate to regain a majority, Turnbull threatened on the weekend to refer four lower house Labor members to the High Court. They allegedly failed to “renounce” their eligibility for British citizenship before the cut-off date

for candidates to nominate for last year's election. Rebekha Sharkie, the only lower house MP of the populist Nick Xenophon Team, would be referred on the same grounds.

The Greens then pledged to provide the Coalition with the vote of its one lower house member to oust the four Labor MPs and Sharkie. Labor retaliated by vowing to go “nuclear,” naming five more Coalition members whom it demanded resign for possibly holding citizenship elsewhere.

As well as these 10, at least 21 further members of both houses of parliament could be referred to the court in a ferocious partisan purge on the parliamentary floor—13 Labor, 4 Liberal, the leaders of the minor Conservative and Jacqui Lambie parties, and two One Nation members, including its leader Pauline Hanson.

The government and Labor struck their deal today to try to avoid this scenario. In a McCarthyite process, those MPs who cannot provide proof they do not hold dual citizenship will be expected to fall on their sword and resign.

The current parliament has been rendered dysfunctional. The Liberal Party is also wracked by internal in-fighting, including over the debacle facing the government, and relations between the Liberal and National parties are reportedly tense. New opinion polls show falling support for the Coalition.

Among possible outcomes being canvassed in the media are a leadership challenge to replace Turnbull; a split in the Liberal Party; the collapse of the Coalition; or an intervention by the unelected governor-general, who has vast “reserve powers” to dissolve both houses of parliament on the pretext that it cannot provide stable government. What is certainly looming is the prospect of an early general election.

The disqualification crisis is a direct outcome of an anti-democratic intervention by the High Court—one of the key

arms of the state. The court has been used to destabilise and potentially bring down the government on the basis that people born overseas, or whose parents or grandparents were immigrants, have “divided loyalties.”

No parliamentary party denounced the ruling, even though it impacts on the rights of at least half the population of Australia, who, by birth or descent, are eligible for citizenship in another country.

If dual citizens cannot stand for parliament, it is not difficult to imagine which nationalist demands could be raised next, such as stripping them of the right to vote or barring them from employment in the public service. Then there are the migrants and their children from countries that do not provide for dual citizenship, such as China and India. What will be demanded of them? A special oath renouncing any lingering “allegiance”?

Millions of people are watching the spectacle unfold with a mixture of bewilderment and anger. The immense alienation from the parliamentary parties is not because of the family background of various politicians. It is due to the anti-working class policies implemented by successive Coalition and Labor governments, including their support for US military operations and a brutal regime against refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

The concerns of masses of workers and youth, over the danger of war, social inequality, falling wages, insecure work, the cost of energy, and the crisis of the health and education systems, find no expression in the political establishment. The organisations that once claimed to represent the working class—Labor and the trade unions—long ago transformed into open appendages of the financial and corporate elite.

As social antagonisms mount, the citizenship witch-hunt is one means being used to divert and divide the population, and lurch official politics even further into anti-immigrant xenophobia. The campaign to unseat politicians over purported “foreign allegiances” was initiated amid a media-stoked campaign against alleged “Chinese influence” in Australian politics and society. The beneficiaries are the most right-wing tendencies and the advocates of unconditional Australian backing for a US-led military confrontation with China and, most immediately, war against North Korea.

While the Turnbull government limps toward collapse, preparations are afoot to consolidate a new right-wing party around the Australian Conservatives recently formed by Senator Cory Bernardi, and incorporating Liberal factions backing former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, as well as elements of the National Party, One

Nation and even more extreme formations.

The potential break-up of the Liberal Party—the key “conservative” parliamentary party in Australia since World War II—parallels international developments. In the US and across Europe, new right-wing and even fascistic formations have emerged to centre-stage, seeking support from disorientated layers of the population by appeals on “cultural” issues such as religion, and blaming immigrants and foreign competition for the social distress that millions of people endure.

In Australia, as around the world, this process is being directly facilitated by the pro-capitalist and nationalist politics of Labor, the trade unions and the Greens. One of the most significant aspects of the citizenship witch-hunt has been the Greens’ vociferous and anti-democratic demands for a purge of all those with alleged “divided loyalties.” Greens leader Richard Di Natale has indicated he is seeking constitutional advice about whether he can petition the governor-general to intervene.

A Liberal Party split may occur as soon as this week, triggered by bitter opposition in conservative ranks to allowing same-sex couples to marry. The result of a government postal “survey” on the issue, which has been used as another political diversion and to galvanise a right-wing base, will be announced on Wednesday.

What is absent from the situation at present is an independent intervention of the working class, putting forward its interests and demands. Everything must be done to prepare for, and encourage, a mass political movement fighting for a socialist and internationalist perspective of genuine social equality and democratic rights for all.



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