After Yes vote for same-sex marriage, Australian government moves to entrench discrimination

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Far from guaranteeing the basic democratic right of marriage equality, the Australian government's postal survey on gay marriage has been, as intended, an exercise in political diversion and division.

The 61.6 percent to 38.4 percent yes vote in the $122 million ballot confirmed what had already been shown by scientifically-conducted opinion polls for at least a decade: strong majority support for the right of all couples, regardless of gender, to legally marry if they so wish.

Every state and territory and the overwhelming majority of electorates recorded "yes" votes, with a 79.5 percent participation rate, demonstrating a groundswell of support for an elementary democratic right that should have been recognised long ago.

The most immediate result of the survey, however, will not be legislation to provide genuine equality for same-sex couples, but laws that entrench discrimination against homosexuals under the fraudulent banners of "free speech" and "religious freedom."

The Liberal-National Coalition government's proposed laws, which are being backed by Labor, the Greens and the rest of the political establishment, will institutionalise the treatment of same sex couples as second-class citizens.

The "survey" was foisted on the population by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to satisfy the demands of "conservative" agitators in the Coalition and other extreme right-wing elements. It was the brainchild of elements, such as former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and Australian Conservatives leader Senator Cory Bernardi, who saw it as a platform to try to create a social base for a right-wing movement.

At their behest, the government is now pushing through the Senate laws that would allow not just ministers of religion, but all civil marriage celebrants to refuse to marry couples on the grounds of sex, sexuality or family status. Religious educational institutions will be permitted to discriminate on the basis of sexuality in regard to employment. The government is also moving to exempt "people of faith" from existing anti-discrimination laws if they continue to denounce and vilify same-sex marriage.

For now, the most right-wing layers in the government have dropped their demands for even further discrimination. These include allowing businesses—including photographers, caterers and venue-hirers—to refuse to service same-sex weddings. But Abbott, Bernardi and others will step up their agitation for such measures to be imposed via separate legislation.

The genuine democratic principle of freedom of religion means the right to practice any form of worship. But for the Coalition's right-wing constituency, it means the right of religious zealots to impose their doctrines on society.

For all the proclamations of a "democratic triumph," the ballot has set a reactionary precedent for plebiscites on fundamental legal and democratic rights. The prospect now exists of right-wing agitation for "surveys" on issues ranging from proscribing Muslim women from wearing the burqa, to banning immigration to Australia by Muslims altogether.

At the same time, in the name of "equality," the protracted plebiscite campaign was used to divert attention from growing social inequality and the other pressing economic and political issues facing the working class—not least the government's commitment, backed by the Labor Party, to join any US-led war against North Korea.

Even as the campaign was underway, the government and the parliament were being wracked by mounting

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numbers of MPs being disqualified on the reactionary basis that they held dual citizenship and therefore lacked "undivided loyalty" to the Australian nation-state, which the High Court insisted was essential in times of war.

Yesterday, on the same day the survey result was released, two telling indicators of social polarisation were published. First, the latest official data showed that real wages declined on average in the September quarter, deepening a four-year fall.

This is the result of a relentless assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class, spearheaded by the same corporate chiefs, such as Qantas CEO Alan Joyce, who are being promoted by the media as heroes of the marriage survey. Led by Joyce, Qantas alone has eliminated 8,000 jobs in the past five years.

Secondly, Credit Suisse, a large private bank, reported a 29 percent rise over the past year in the number of "ultra-high net worth individuals" in Australia whose net assets exceed $64 million. Among these nearly 3,000 members of the wealthy elite are the bankers and business leaders who yesterday hailed the ballot outcome as good for their companies.

From the outset, as the Socialist Equality Party warned, the postal ballot was an operation to stymie genuine marriage equality, stave off the collapse of the Liberal-National Coalition and lay the basis for an extreme right-wing movement seeking to divert and exploit the mounting working-class discontent and disaffection produced by the corporate offensive.

Significantly, the highest "yes" votes were recorded in the wealthiest electorates, where the results were above, or close to 80 percent. The lowest yes vote—and also the smallest participation rate—was in some of the poorest working-class areas of Sydney and Melbourne. In the western Sydney seat of Blaxland, covering Bankstown, a quarter of voters declined to mail in their questionnaire and the "no" vote was 73.9 percent.

Attempts are being made in the media to depict this pattern as the result of innate bigotry or backwardness in the working class and immigrant communities. This is a libel.

The abstentions and no votes reflect an underlying hostility toward the political, corporate and media elite. These areas have been devastated by decades of job destruction, declining incomes and soaring living costs. In the latest attack, Ford recently shut down its assembly plant at Broadmeadows in the heart of the Calwell electorate, in northern Melbourne, where the no vote was 56.8 percent.

Right-wing elements, including Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, targeted these areas. They agitated for a "no" vote on the basis that the ballot represented a broader assault by the "establishment" on free speech, religious practices and parents' ability to provide their children with a religious-based education. The "no" propaganda featured false claims that religious people would be persecuted and children would be forced to perform homosexual role-playing at school.

Figures such as Bernardi and Abbott, emulating Donald Trump and right-wing movements in Europe, are propagating sectarianism and xenophobia as a means of dividing the working class and channeling mounting social antagonisms in nationalist directions. They always regarded the marriage plebiscite as part of a wider political campaign.

In a column published in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* on Tuesday, the day before the ballot result was announced, Abbott declared: "[D]efeat could turn out to be a blessing in disguise if it forces the defenders of Western civilisation out of their long complacency."

Abbott lauded "the ability of the No case to mobilise more than 5,000 volunteer doorknockers and phone canvassers and to raise more than $6 million from 20,000-plus individual donors." He insisted: "The challenge will be to keep the faith and stay the course for the even more important struggles ahead."

The greatest fear of these circles, and the ruling class as a whole, is the emergence of a movement of the working class, across ethnic and religious lines, openly fighting to end the capitalist profit system and national-state divisions—the source of war, exploitation and all forms of oppression.

As the SEP explained in its October 19 statement, which correctly advocated a boycott of the plebiscite as a travesty of democratic rights: "The realisation of genuine social and democratic equality can only be carried out by the international working class, unified in a world movement on the basis of the perspective of socialist internationalism."

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