

Australian government backs far-right “OK to be white” motion in Senate

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Last Monday, Liberal-National Coalition senators voted unanimously for a resolution by Senator Pauline Hanson, the leader of the anti-immigrant One Nation Party, promoting a notorious white supremacist slogan. In a revealing political stand, they openly joined far-right senators in backing Hanson’s “it is okay to be white” motion, which was only narrowly defeated, by 28 votes to 31.

The vote caused widespread outrage, and attracted international media attention, because it so nakedly aligned the government with the type of far-right and fascistic elements emerging in Europe and the United States. With a crucial by-election in the Sydney electorate of Wentworth this Saturday, there was also evident nervousness that the line-up with Hanson could cost the Liberal Party votes.

Recently-installed Prime Minister Scott Morrison publicly back-tracked the next day, saying the Senate vote was “regrettable.” Cabinet ministers blamed an inexplicable “administrative error.” At the suggestion of the opposition Labor Party, the Senate vote was placed back on the notice paper so that Coalition senators could reverse their vote on Tuesday.

Whatever the short-term tactical calculations behind the about-face, the fact that the government embraced the slogan, long championed by alt-right and neo-Nazi groups in the US and elsewhere, has a far-reaching significance. It underscores the lurch to the right within the entire political establishment signalled by the August 24 backroom removal of Morrison’s predecessor Malcolm Turnbull.

By lining up with Hanson, who has agitated against Muslims, Asians and Aborigines for two decades, the Morrison leadership is pitching to a still-small but vocal socially conservative and xenophobic base. Above all, it is seeking to divert mounting political and social discontent throughout the working class in reactionary nationalist and racist directions.

Hanson’s motion stated: “That the Senate acknowledges: (a) the deplorable rise of anti-white racism and attacks on Western civilisation; and (b) that it is okay to be white.” Thus, it linked a well-known white supremacist slogan to the

supposed defence of “Western civilisation”—itself code for anti-Islamic and anti-Chinese xenophobia that feeds into support for US-led militarism in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Monday’s vote was no “mistake.” Among the 23 Coalition senators voting for the motion were some of the government’s most senior figures. They included deputy Senate leader and Trade Minister Simon Birmingham, Small Business Minister Michaelia Cash, Resources Minister Matt Canavan, Communications Minister Mitch Fifield, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion and deputy National Party leader Bridget McKenzie.

They joined hands with Hanson and her fellow One Nation senator, Peter Georgiou; Australian Conservatives senator Cory Bernardi; the “free market” libertarian David Leyonjhelm of the Liberal Democratic Party; and Fraser Anning of Katter’s Australian Party. Anning recently devoted his maiden speech to calling for a “final solution” to ban non-European immigration and reintroduce the “White Australia” policy.

Moreover, the Coalition senators voted according to instructions from the office of Attorney-General Christian Porter, who quickly tweeted his support for their stand. “The Government Senators’ actions in the Senate this afternoon confirm that the Government deplores racism of any kind,” he said.

Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, a central figure in the ousting of Turnbull, echoed Porter, tweeting: “The Government indeed deplores racism of any kind.”

Porter later claimed that his staff issued the voting instructions, without his knowledge. Cormann said it was just an “embarrassing” mix up. But Hanson had tabled the motion last month, and promoted it in an interview on Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News, giving the government ample time to consider its response.

Equally implausible is any suggestion that the government was unaware of the white supremacist connotations of the “it’s OK to be white” slogan. Far-right groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis, have long used the slogan to

stoke racial division as a means of splitting and diverting the struggles of the working class.

White supremacist propaganda has promoted the slogan since at least 2001, and it was given new prominence around October 2017, when 4chan message board users began broadcasting it as a means of popularising alt-right themes. The world's most prominent neo-Nazi website, the *Daily Stormer*, promoted the campaign, and former KKK grand wizard David Duke claimed it was "sweeping" the US.

Most recently, when Canadian alt-right activist Lauren Southern visited Australia in July, and met with Hanson, she provocatively sported a T-shirt declaring "it's OK to be white."

Significantly, the Morrison government's decision to back away from openly fomenting jingoism, at least for now, was condemned by some Coalition MPs, notably those who agitated for the dumping of Turnbull.

Former military general Senator Jim Molan said the government looked "weak" in blaming its initial support for the motion on an administrative error. Lower house backbencher Luke Howarth told Sky News: "They should have just come out and said straightforward that the reason that they voted for it is because when you read what Senator Hanson said, in itself, (it) is fine."

Even after the government reversed its vote in the Senate, another Queensland MP, George Christensen, reiterated his support for the "it's OK to be white" proposition.

The attempt to whip up nationalism, and anti-Chinese sentiment in particular, has been brought to the very centre of official Australian politics.

Under Turnbull, with Labor's full backing, the government pushed through draconian "foreign interference" laws. It announced new "Australian values" and English language tests for immigrants, and presided over a witch hunt against members of parliament who were entitled to any foreign citizenship.

But Turnbull, a member of the financial elite, opposed efforts by the Liberal Party's most right-wing faction, centred around ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, to fully shift the party behind the most extreme right-wing populism.

When Hanson staged a provocative anti-Muslim stunt in the Senate in August 2017, wearing a burqa to agitate for a ban on the Islamic headdress, government ministers joined their Labor Party and Greens colleagues in feigning outrage. Turnbull also criticised the racist speech of Fraser Anning.

Since Turnbull's ouster, the refashioning of the Liberal and National parties to the right has accelerated. Morrison has flagged proposals such as forcing new arrivals to live and work in designated zones of the country in a blatant attempt to blame migrants for the soaring living costs and

deteriorating basic infrastructure that confront millions of working class people.

At the same time, Morrison has aligned Australian policy unequivocally with the Trump administration's "America First" aggression. This week Morrison proposed following the US in shifting the country's Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. Turnbull, by contrast, had been treated with suspicion in Washington because of his efforts to shore up relations with China, Australian capitalism's biggest export market.

Amid the outcry over the Hanson motion, there was much hypocrisy from the Labor Party and the Greens, who urged Coalition MPs to change their votes. As much as the Coalition, however, they are responsible for creating the economic and political conditions in which far-right elements can gain traction among segments of the population.

Decades of worsening living standards and ever-more glaring social inequality, imposed by Coalition and Greens-backed Labor governments alike, have permitted nationalist agitators like Hanson and Bob Katter to posture as opponents of the "elites" and champions of those impoverished by them.

Moreover, Labor and the trade unions have waged anti-immigrant and protectionist campaigns that blame immigrants and "foreign" workers for the corporate assault on workers' jobs and conditions. They have railed against the entry of workers on temporary visas, pursued a vicious bipartisan drive to block all refugees from fleeing to Australia and joined scare-mongering about "Islamic terrorists" and "African crime gangs," effectively demonising entire layers of the population.

Since 2001, Labor and Coalition governments alike have used the bogus "war on terror" as the pretext for participating in criminal wars in the Middle East, and eviscerating fundamental civil liberties. In 2011, Labor committed Australia to backing the confrontational US military build-up in Asia, which has escalated under Trump into open trade war and preparations for war.

Against the danger of war and the promotion of fascistic elements, the only progressive alternative is the fight for the unity of the international working class, in a common struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profit dictates of the corporate elite.



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