Abortion bill in NSW used to push Australian politics further to the right

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Legislation to decriminalise abortion in Australia's most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), is being used by forces within the state's ruling Liberal Party to push politics even further in the direction of extreme right-wing populism.

The Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019, which passed in the state's Legislative Assembly (lower house) on August 8, is scheduled to be voted on in the upper house (Legislative Council) tomorrow, September 17. A delay was demanded by its right-wing opponents in order to gain time to block the bill's passage in its present form.

NSW is the last state in Australia to decriminalise abortion, although in South Australia and Western Australia it remains in the criminal code in different forms. NSW doctors can conduct abortions if they believe the pregnancy is a risk to a woman's physical or mental health and, under a common law precedent set in 1971, such a determination can include economic and social factors.

The laws against abortion in the state, however, are still being used. There have been 12 prosecutions over the past 25 years under the 119-year-old Crimes Act, with four people found guilty and sentenced. The most recent case was in 2017. A mother of five was prosecuted for self-administering a drug to induce a miscarriage.

The overwhelming sentiment of the population in NSW and Australia, revealed in polls over the past 50 years, is for the right of all women to access abortion without fear of criminal prosecution.

The abortion decriminalisation bill was introduced as a private members' bill in order to bring NSW into line with the other states regarding abortion availability. It was supported by Premier Gladys Berejiklian and many Liberal-National Coalition government MPs but nevertheless stoked furious and vicious opposition inside the Liberal Party and more broadly.

Anti-abortion organisations, religious groups, and right-wing MPs, radio commentators and journalists have launched a hysterical campaign to block the bill's passing. They have falsely declared that the bill allows for terminations "for any reason even up until birth" and "sanctions sex-selection abortions."

Liberal MP Tanya Davies, in moving amendments to all but scuttle the bill, asserted that women in "Indian, Chinese and south-east Asian migrant communities abort female foetuses because of a 'son preference'." The studies she cited, however, which show a higher ratio of boys born to Chinese and Indian mothers, did not investigate or prove that this was the result of gender selection abortions. The legislation already includes a provision that the Secretary of Health must review it after 12 months to ensure there were no sex selection abortions.

A further amendment requires that terminations after 22 weeks must be approved by two doctors, one of whom is a specialist obstetrician or gynaecologist. The Queensland Law Reform Commission found that only 1–3 percent of abortions took place after 22 weeks and occur as a result of severe foetal abnormalities.

A slew of 10 amendments are likely to be moved and sponsored in the upper house by a variety of right-wing MPs, including One Nation's Mark Latham, the Christian Democrats' Fred Nile and some Labor parliamentarians. It will include the demand that abortions after 20 weeks be banned unless the life of the mother or another unborn life is threatened.

Two right-wing Liberal MPs are threatening to split from the party if the bill is passed. If this eventuates, the Coalition would be reduced to a minority government and Berejiklian could be ousted as leader and premier.

This prospect makes it highly likely that, even if the bill is passed by the upper house, it will be significantly different from what was ratified by the lower house last month. Labor, Liberal and National MPs who voted for the bill on August 8 have now indicated they are prepared to amend the bill substantially.

Ahead of this week's upper house vote, a cabal of right-wing populists has stepped up their campaign to have the legislation amended, led by former prime minister Tony Abbott and ex-National Party leader and deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce.

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At an anti-abortion rally in Sydney on Sunday, Abbott declared that the legislation would allow “effectively infanticide on demand.” Joyce labelled abortion an “animalistic process” and declared the campaign to prevent decriminalisation was “the slavery debate of our time.”

The highly emotive demagogy over abortion employed by a figure like Abbott is part of a broader campaign to mobilise a right-wing Christian base and recruit them into the Liberal Party. The objective is to further shift the organisation to the right, under conditions in which it holds power at the national level.

On August 9, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) quoted from a document entitled “NSW Reformers—Taking Back our Nation Through Good Government.” The metadata, according to the SMH, suggests that it was written by a staff member in a ministerial office of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government headed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The document stated: “[I]f we recruit 5,000 Christian conservatives, we will control the NSW division of the Liberal Party.”

The *Australian* reported on August 6 that a recent NSW executive meeting of the Liberal Party was informed that 1,300 new members have joined in the last 12 months, an increase of 10 percent. Such a rate of recruitment had not been experienced for decades and was attributed, in the main, to Morrison’s ousting of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in September 2018 and his subsequent May 18 election victory this year. The Victorian Liberal Party has also reportedly recruited 600 new members.

Morrison is a devout Pentecostal Christian, right-wing populist and ardent nationalist and militarist. Since his ascension to the leadership, the Liberal-National government has stepped-up the xenophobic hysteria over refugees, immigration and purported “Chinese interference”.

The diversions and distractions have been used to push through a corporate agenda of tax cuts for the rich and to strengthen Australia’s alignment with US military war preparations against China. Morrison’s government has escalated the longstanding assault on democratic rights, with unprecedented police raids against Newscorp journalist Annika Smethurst and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for publishing whistleblower leaks about Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. Morrison has endorsed the laying of espionage charges by the US against persecuted Australian publisher Julian Assange and dismissed out of hand any suggestion that the government would seek to defend him.

The Liberals are expecting more new members to join its ranks on the back of the disbanding of the Australian Conservatives of Cory Bernardi who split with the Liberal Party in February 2017 to build a Trump-style populist movement based on nationalism, anti-immigrant hysteria and unabashed commitment to the US alliance.

Following poor results for his party in the 2019 election, Bernardi stated: “The inescapable conclusion from our lack of political success, our financial position and the re-election of a Morrison-led government is that the rationale for the creation of the Australian Conservatives is no longer valid… The Morrison government victory and policy agenda suggests we are well on the way to restoring common sense in the Australian parliament.”

Bernardi’s perspective—which he now believes is being carried out by Morrison—was always to exploit religious and racial prejudice to forge a conservative right-wing social base who would support a militarist and corporate agenda.

The situation parallels the United States, from where the Australian ultra-right such as Bernardi and Abbott openly draw their inspiration. The campaign against abortion in NSW dovetails with the campaign waged under the Trump administration to reverse the right to abortion that was established in the famous 1973 “Roe v Wade” Supreme Court decision. In the 26 months since Trump’s inauguration, 16 US states have passed anti-abortion legislation.

The drive to consolidate extreme right-wing formations, whether inside the present political parties of the Liberals and Nationals or outside, is not the outcome of support for right-wing policies among the broad mass of working people. Rather, it stems from the fact that staggering levels of social inequality and hardship, authoritarian forms of rule and the growing threat of war against China are propelling the working class into struggles in Australia and internationally.

The right-wing, fearful that such a movement will turn to a socialist and revolutionary perspective which unites the working class internationally against capitalism, is seeking to divert mass disaffection with the political establishment, including the Labor Party, the Greens and the trade unions, along religious, racial and cultural lines and to whip up nationalism. The anti-abortion campaign is one aspect.

It is only through the development of an independent and international socialist movement of the working class that all democratic rights can be defended—including the elementary right of all women to free and safe abortion procedures.

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