Further slush fund revelations intensify political crisis in Australia

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More details are emerging that show the Liberal-National Coalition government handed out millions of dollars to local sports clubs and municipal councils to try to hold onto key marginal electorates in Australia's May 2019 federal election.

The continuing revelations further call into question the legitimacy of the government's narrow election win as the slush funds helped it secure a bare two-seat majority. They also highlight the extent to which the Labor Party and Greens are seeking to shield the government by hiving off the revelations to toothless official and Senate committee inquiries.

In addition, the latest reports are aggravating rifts within the highly unstable Coalition. Just days after Prime Minister Scott Morrison forced the deputy leader of the rural-based Nationals, Senator Bridget McKenzie, to resign from cabinet as a scapegoat for the pork-barrelling of a $100 million sports grants scheme, an even larger and more blatant $150 million slush fund has been revealed.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the *Guardian* have reported that 73 percent of the government's $150 million "female facilities and water safety stream" (FFWSS) program, jointly announced by Morrison and McKenzie just six weeks before the election, had been allocated to marginal or "at-risk" seats. The funding took place without any guidelines, applications or even tenders being called.

As with the initial "sports rorts" scandal that engulfed the government from mid-January, Morrison and many of his leading ministers are directly implicated in the Coalition's desperate vote-buying efforts. The great majority of the FFWSS funding has been pledged to build 11 swimming pools in targeted electorates, even where local councils or people did not want the pools, which are expensive to maintain.

The largest single grant was $25 million for a swimming pool in Attorney-General Christian Porter's marginal Perth seat of Pearce, which was announced just three weeks before the election.

News of the second slush fund was reported on Thursday, just after Labor and the Greens sponsored a Senate motion to hold a powerless committee inquiry into the $100 million "community sport infrastructure" scheme, which an auditor-general's report condemned for "distributional bias" and the unlawful overturning of merits-based Sport Australia recommendations.

Such committee inquiries are a means of quelling the popular outrage over the slush funds and diverting it back into the hands of the parliamentary establishment in the hope of eventually suffocating the outcry.

On Friday, Labor leader Anthony Albanese said the FFWSS program was "sports rorts on steroids." It had been "abused for political purposes where the only guidelines were the electoral map and the political interests of the government." Yet he made no call for the resignation of Morrison or the government.

Likewise, the Greens, now led by Adam Bandt, wrote to the auditor-general asking for an audit of the FFWSS program. As Morrison's rejection of the audit report on the $100 million sports grants scheme demonstrated, governments can brush aside such reports, no matter what the evidence proves.

The moves by Labor and the Greens to prop up the government express the fact that they are both an integral part of the political establishment, which is entirely beholden to the corporate ruling class. They are just as fearful as the Coalition of the deepening political discontent produced by decades of worsening social inequality and working class living and working conditions.

The role of these official opposition parties was all

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the more stark because elements within the National Party, led by ex-leader Barnaby Joyce, are threatening to potentially cross the floor in parliament to vote against the government, at least on certain issues. One Joyce backer, Llew O'Brien, quit the Nationals last night, although he said he would continue to support the government in confidence votes.

The immediate spark for these moves was McKenzie's removal, which triggered a failed bid by Joyce to oust party leader Michael McCormack, the deputy prime minister. The conflict was intensified by Morrison's subsequent cabinet reshuffle, which excluded Joyce's supporters.

But the schism in the National Party reflects wider divisions, which are also wracking the Liberal Party and the Liberal National Party, the merged party in the former "resources boom" state of Queensland.

In part, these rifts are over the growing public concern about climate change, the disastrous impact of which has been shown in the ongoing bushfire disaster. Joyce and his backers, such as dumped Resources Minister Matt Canavan, flatly deny global warming and voice the profit interests of the coal, gas and oil giants that form a large part of the Australian capitalist class.

Other elements, mostly in the self-styled "moderate" wing of the Liberal Party of deposed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, are seeking to appease the widespread concern. They rest on the equally rapacious interests of those sections of the financial elite looking to exploit new energy markets, supposed "green" industries, carbon credit trading schemes and other alternative profit sources.

At the same time, the differences that have increasingly destabilised the Coalition and the entire political system since 2007 have deeper roots. They lie in the mounting unrest among working-class households and young people over the deteriorating social conditions imposed by successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, for decades to satisfy the requirements of global conglomerates.

This underlying discontent has been fuelled by the government's indifferent, belated and inadequate reaction to the bushfire catastrophe, which has devastated the lives of thousands of workers, farmers and small business operators.

Joyce's camp is striving to distance itself from the Liberal Party, fearing the loss of much of the National Party's rural and regional constituency to right-wing populists, such as Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation, which have posed as anti-elite formations while seeking to divert the discontent in reactionary nationalist directions.

The rifts also lie in the sharpening tensions over the US confrontation with China, Australian capitalism's largest export market. Morrison has strengthened the political establishment's commitment to the US military alliance, but this could threaten access to Chinese commodity and student tourism markets.

When Morrison ousted Turnbull via a backroom coup in August 2018, he was backed by the Trump administration, along with the most right-wing elements within the Coalition. Morrison manoeuvred to grab the leadership from Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who was the initial right-wing challenger to Turnbull.

Morrison set about trying to develop a Trump-style base, pitching himself as an outsider to the "Canberra bubble," while delivering huge tax handouts to the wealthy and bolstering the military and intelligence apparatus. But he has become a discredited figure since secretly holidaying in Hawaii as the bushfire inferno worsened, followed by his cynical attempts to deny any responsibility for the "sports rorts."

Despite the efforts of the Labor Party and the Greens to hold the parliamentary framework together, the instability that has already seen six prime ministers ousted since 2007 is continuing.

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