

Australian government exploits family funeral to push for end to coronavirus border restrictions

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The federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week exploited the inability of a woman living in Canberra to attend her father's funeral in Queensland to whip up a frenzied campaign against all coronavirus border restrictions. This is part of a wider offensive aimed at eliminating health policy measures that hinder the profit-making operations of big business and finance capital.

Queensland man Bernard Prendergast died on September 2 and his family held a funeral service last Thursday, September 10. One of his daughters, 26-year-old Sarah Caisip, had relocated from Canberra to Queensland before her father died, but had been unable to see him in person before the end of the mandatory hotel quarantine two-week period. After his death she was given special authorisation to view her father's coffin, but was not permitted to attend the funeral service.

Queensland chief health officer Dr Jeanette Young, who authorises border restrictions and exemptions, explained that funerals were deemed high risk events for coronavirus contagion. "Although I understand the enormous toll this takes on people who are coming to Queensland to attend a funeral of a loved one, they can't do that until they've been in quarantine for 14 days," she explained. "The last thing I would want to happen is to have an outbreak at a funeral and by definition, there are always older people who attend funerals."

Graeme Orr, professor of law at the University of Queensland, told journalist Michelle Grattan that only a public health officer could decide on quarantine exemptions, and that "under the crime and corruption law it would be highly inappropriate for a minister to intervene."

The situation would have been a difficult, private affair for the Prendergast-Caisip family—had it not been for the calculated intervention of the federal government and the corporate media.

On the day of the funeral, Scott Morrison made a flurry of phone calls. He first rang Sarah Caisip, to offer his

"encouragement," he later said. He then contacted Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and reportedly berated her over the phone in a "belligerent" manner, demanding that she intervene in the case by yelling, "you will do this."

Morrison followed this up with a radio interview with right-wing Sydney "shock jock" Ray Hadley. In an extraordinary performance, the prime minister seemed to choke back tears as he recalled the death of his own father at the beginning of the year, and waxed lyrical about the significance of September 6, Father's Day.

On the same morning, in a clearly coordinated ambush on the floor of the Queensland parliament, members of the Liberal National Party echoed the prime minister's attack on the state government.

Bernard Prendergast's funeral service on Thursday afternoon saw no let up. That evening, Morrison appeared on Sky News, speaking with Peta Credlin, previously chief of staff to former Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Morrison referred to photographs splashed across the media hours earlier, of Sarah Caisip viewing her father's coffin while wearing personal protective equipment. "I've seen the images of when she went to see her dad and there've been some shocking days during the course of this pandemic," he declared. "Sadly, today, I didn't have the influence that I would hope to have. But Sarah doesn't get today back."

Multiple other government ministers weighed in. Finance Minister Mathias Cormann labelled Queensland authorities "cold-hearted and nasty". Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton declared that interstate travellers denied quarantine exemptions were being treated "cruelly" and like "prisoners."

The corporate media played its part, making the Prendergast funeral front-page news over several days.

Only the wilfully naïve could believe that the government-media campaign had anything whatsoever to do with the rights of the grieving Prendergast-Caisip family.

Alexandra Prendergast, Bernard's eldest child, yesterday issued an open letter to Morrison, stating that she was "extremely disappointed that you have used my family to try and advance your political agenda." She explained that the prime minister's statements on the morning of the funeral had "prompted a media circus outside the crematorium at which the service was held... I am devastated that the final memories of my father have been marred by the media you have used to prosecute your political agenda."

The "humanitarian" posturing of the prime minister was staggering in its hypocrisy. Suffice it to recall that in 2011, Morrison, then opposition immigration minister, demanded that refugees detained on the Christmas Island detention centre be barred from attending the funerals on the Australian mainland of eight of their family members, including two babies, who had drowned after a boat disaster.

The federal government's aim with the Queensland funeral matter was to shift public opinion against border restrictions, which corporate Australia now regards as one of the coronavirus emergency measures that has to be scrapped. Morrison's intervention on the Queensland funeral came just four days after he denounced the Victorian state government's "roadmap" to end lockdown restrictions in Melbourne, the epicentre of Australia's COVID-19 pandemic.

The prime minister has complained that the proposed timeline was far too slow and that the economy should be reopened as quickly as possible. In this he was echoing the demands of corporate lobby groups. Paul Guerra, head of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, demanded that profit interests be prioritised ahead of public health. "Business needs to be heard," he declared, "and that's the part that we've been disappointed about, is [that] health measures have taken priority."

The enormous economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic undermined the bipartisan, pro-business unity of the Liberal-National and Labor parties, and the trade unions. Tactical divisions have emerged as one wing of the ruling class has evidently concluded that emergency restrictions on travel and economic activity have proven too costly to business and ought to be jettisoned, regardless of the final death toll for working people. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott's public call at the beginning of September for the effective adoption of a "herd immunity" policy clearly reflected wider, behind closed doors discussions within ruling circles.,

The most disoriented, extreme right-wing elements are being whipped up, in a similar manner to what US President Donald Trump has done as he has sought to sabotage all lockdown restrictions. Conspiracy theorists are now staging regular anti-lockdown "freedom rallies" in Melbourne,

while confronted with a large police response, including riot officers. In Queensland, chief health officer Dr Jeanette Young now requires 24-hour police protection after she received death threats following Morrison's campaign over the funeral exemption.

The Labor Party is a no less ruthless representative of big business interests than the Liberal-National parties. Labor state governments, however, including in Victoria and Queensland, have calculated that fully reopening the economy can only effectively follow the suppression of community transmission of coronavirus infections. They are deeply fearful of the political consequences of any further surge of the pandemic, which they know will further inflame social and political opposition, above all from the working class.

Labor governments share responsibility with the Morrison government for the preventable COVID-19 disaster—the entire political establishment failed to invest the necessary resources in emergency healthcare, provision of personal protective equipment, mass coronavirus testing, and contact tracing infrastructure.

To the extent that the Liberal Party is able to gain any traction at all in its fake-populist campaign against state government restrictions, it is largely due to Labor's efforts to placate business groups at the expense of public health and safety. Queensland border restrictions, for example, have been modified or ignored altogether for people in the film industry, including actor Tom Hanks, and the sport industry, reportedly including the 400 Australian Rules Football executives and their family members who flew into the state for the announcement that Brisbane would host this year's grand final, a multi-million dollar event.

The chief health officer bluntly explained: "I have given exemptions for people in entertainment and film because that is bringing a lot of money into this state and, can I say, we need every single dollar in our state." Also exempted were several millionaire owners of "superyachts," with the chief health officer last month declaring, "We're quite an important place for repairs for a lot for those superyachts—we have a significant industry in that."



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