

Forty-five years since the Canberra Coup

James Cogan
10 November 2020

Today is the 45th anniversary of the November 11, 1975 removal of the Whitlam Labor government by the Governor-General John Kerr in what became known as the “Canberra Coup.”

Kerr, a US-connected ex-intelligence officer and judge, served as the instrument for the government’s dismissal because the 1901 Australian Constitution preserves the “reserve powers” of the British monarchy, via the governor-general, to sack a government.

The political issues posed by the crisis of 1975 are now more relevant than ever. Internationally, not least in the United States, the ruling capitalist class is moving increasingly toward dispensing with basic democratic norms. That is because a new period of mass working class struggles is emerging over the staggering levels of social inequality, intensifying police-military violence and danger of war, further fuelled by governments’ homicidal profit-driven response to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

This year’s release of the 1975 “Palace Papers”—the correspondence between Kerr and the monarch’s top-level advisers in the British ruling establishment before and after the coup—confirmed the intimate involvement of the Royal Household, and therefore Britain’s US-linked intelligence apparatus in engineering the Whitlam government’s removal.

There is also intensifying pressure on the Australian corporate, political and military-intelligence establishment to align ever more closely with the US as it steps up its economic and military confrontation with China. In these conditions, the tearing aside of the façade of parliamentary democracy in 1975 must serve as a warning of the readiness of the capitalist class to again resort to anti-democratic measures to suppress social and political opposition.

Above all, a political break is necessary with the Labor Party and the trade unions, which suppressed the mass working class opposition to the Canberra Coup. Over the past four decades they have only become even more committed to the defence of capitalist rule and enforcing the requirements of the corporate elite.

Below we are republishing the article written by James Cogan to mark the 40th anniversary of the Canberra Coup that draws out the crucial political lessons for workers and young people.

Forty years ago, on November 11, 1975, Australian Governor-General John Kerr, the constitutional representative of the British monarch, Australia’s head of state, used the “reserve powers” vested in his position to dismiss the elected Labor Party government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

The pretext for the dismissal was the refusal of the opposition conservative parties, which controlled the Senate—the upper house of parliament—to consider the government’s budget appropriation bills, depriving it of the money needed to meet the day-to-day functions of office. On the day of the coup, Whitlam had intended to break the impasse by formally requesting that Kerr call a half-Senate election. When Kerr told him that he had instead been ousted as prime minister

and replaced by opposition leader Malcolm Fraser, the formal request was reportedly in Whitlam’s top pocket.

Kerr’s actions demonstrated that real power lay in the hands of the financial and corporate elites, and behind them the state apparatus, which were more than prepared to toss aside the façade of parliamentary democracy to defend their interests. The coup was preceded by months of a deliberate destabilisation of the Whitlam government through scandals and dirty tricks campaigns, and incessant demands that it step down and call new elections, despite having been re-elected for three years in May 1974.

Every state institution was implicated in the anti-democratic conspiracy that became known as the “Canberra Coup”: the highest representatives of the judiciary; the intelligence agencies; the military; the public service hierarchy; and the mass media. There is no doubt that the CIA and US ambassador Marshall Green, a particularly sinister figure who served in Indonesia during the murderous 1965 military coup in that country, were actively involved in the intrigues.

US intelligence whistle-blower Christopher Boyce, who revealed CIA involvement in the Canberra Coup, later stated that it was “the velvet glove version of the government overthrow in Chile” in 1973, which brought the Pinochet dictatorship to power. It was a velvet glove that nevertheless contained a mailed fist. Military units were on standby to impose the dictates of the ruling elite by force if necessary.

Four decades later, the Australian establishment remains preoccupied with preventing the working class from understanding what actually took place and drawing the necessary political conclusions. A recent book co-authored by Murdoch journalists Paul Kelly and Troy Bramston, *The Dismissal: In the Queen’s Name*, advances the absurd theory that this monumental crisis was the outcome of the specific personalities of Kerr, Whitlam and Fraser. In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” program on November 3, Kelly asserted that the “flawed Kerr personality” had a “grand obsession” that Whitlam was seeking to remove him from his post, so moved to oust him first. In an article in the Australian newspaper on November 9, Bramston baldly asserted: “There is no evidence of CIA involvement.”

Another lie that surrounds the events of 1975, constantly repeated by defenders of the Labor Party, is that Whitlam was removed because his government was too “left-wing.” In reality, the concern in both Australia and the US was that Labor had failed to stem the powerful and explosive movement of the working class that had brought it to power in 1972, after 23 years of continuous conservative party government.

Political conditions in Australia were part of international upheavals that erupted in the working class between 1968 and 1975 that assumed revolutionary dimensions in many countries and shook the foundations of capitalist rule. Workers and the oppressed around the world came forward to win major advances in their social conditions

and democratic rights.

Upon assuming office, Whitlam's Labor government attempted to keep the working class in check by granting limited social reforms. Under pressure from below, it implemented policies such as free university education, state-subsidised health, improvements in social welfare and environmental protection laws. At the same time, however, it sought to curb workers' demands for wages and improved working conditions. The working class rejected Labor's 1973 referendum to grant the power to control incomes and instead launched the greatest strike wave since 1919, forcing unprecedented pay increases and other concessions from bewildered employers.

By 1975, Australia was being engulfed by the worst global slump since the 1930s Depression. The attempts of the ruling elite to make the working class pay for the crisis through rampant price inflation and the destruction of jobs were defiantly resisted. The country was wracked with strikes and political discontent.

The Australian ruling elite, and its counterparts in the US, were discussing the situation with growing alarm. The prospect loomed of an open confrontation between the working class and the Labor Party, which had historically been the chief means of keeping workers confined to the safe political channels of parliamentary elections and trade unionism. If workers began to break with Labor, the fear in ruling circles was that it could take the form of a turn toward a socialist and revolutionary perspective.

In April 1975, Washington suffered the debacle of the fall of its puppet state in South Vietnam to the national liberation movement led by the Stalinist Communist Party of Vietnam. The post-World War II dominance exerted by the US in Asia had become tenuous. It was reliant on corrupt and inherently unstable military dictatorships and one-party regimes to suppress the immense hostility to American imperialism across the region. The Australian continent was then, as now, a strategically crucial American base of operations. Washington was not prepared to contemplate a social upheaval in Australia that would call into question its reliability as a key US ally and encourage opposition throughout Asia.

The ousting of the Whitlam government was aimed at bringing the movement of the working class to an end. While the state apparatus waited in the wings, the coup's success relied above all on the collaboration of the Labor and union leaderships, particularly their so-called "left" factions, and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia. From the moment of Whitlam's dismissal, they worked together to demobilise the opposition and prevent the political general strike that was spontaneously developing across the country. They insisted that workers respect the authority of the state and passively await the outcome of a new election.

Bob Hawke, the Stalinist-backed, pro-American president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), spelt out the position of the labour bureaucracy on the day of the coup. He declared: "We must not substitute violence in the streets and anarchy for the processes of democracy. Of course I am upset, but it is not just a question of a Labor government appearing to fall... What has happened today could unleash forces in this country the like of which we have never seen. We are on the edge of something quite terrible and therefore it is important that the Australian people respond to leadership."

The treacherous actions of Labor and the unions demoralised workers and convinced significant sections of the middle class that the coup conspirators were firmly in control. In the elections held on December 13, 1975, they swung behind Fraser's promises of a return to stability and the Liberal-National coalition won the largest

parliamentary majority in Australian history.

The Canberra Coup was one of the first acts in what became an international counter-offensive against the working class, spearheaded by US imperialism. As The Historical and International Foundations of the US Socialist Equality Party published in 2008 stated, the craven capitulation of the labour bureaucracies to events such as the coup in Australia "served only to encourage the international bourgeoisie that it could attack the working class with impunity."

The Australian Labor Party responded to the coup by repudiating its perspective of limited national social reform. It refashioned itself as the unquestioned defender of the US alliance and primary advocate of the "international competitiveness" being demanded by transnational companies under the new conditions of globalised production.

Labor came back to power with Bob Hawke as prime minister in 1983. For 13 years, it carried out the free-market deregulation of the Australian economy and an onslaught against the working class that paralleled Thatcher's in Britain and Reagan's in the US.

Forty years after the events of 1975, the working class confronts a systemic crisis of world capitalism, a deepening assault on its social conditions and the mounting danger of war.

The role of Labor as the unalloyed representative of big business and Australian and US imperialism was again underscored in June 2010. Under conditions where Washington believed that then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was baulking at lining up with the ever more provocative US policy toward China, Labor powerbrokers, named as US assets in WikiLeaks cables, ousted him in an overnight political coup and, under Julia Gillard, re-aligned Australian foreign policy with the US "pivot" to Asia. Labor placed Australia on the front line of US attempts to reverse its protracted economic decline by preparing war against China, a nuclear-armed state, and ensuring the continued domination of American banks and corporations.

The essential lesson of the Canberra Coup is that while the ruling class will utilise every method to maintain its rule, it above all relies on the crisis of leadership in the working class. The coup was not successful because the state was too powerful. It succeeded because the determination of workers to defend their democratic and social rights was compromised by misplaced illusions in the Labor Party and trade union organisations, and their supporters and apologists in the pseudo-left.

The critical task today, in the fight to prevent war, austerity and the drive to dictatorship, is for the working class to make a political break from the nationalist and pro-capitalist politics of all the old organisations, including Labor and the unions, and to build the mass revolutionary, internationalist movement necessary to lead the struggle for socialism. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party, Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. To request information on how to join, click here.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact