

# As pandemic intensifies public discontent, Australian government unveils anti-democratic electoral laws

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17 August 2021

Suddenly last Thursday, in the midst of a deepening political crisis, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government tabled four anti-democratic electoral bills in a blatant attempt to shore up the increasingly discredited parliamentary establishment.

In particular, the bills seek to strip party registration from all parties not currently represented in parliament, by requiring them to provide lists of 1,500 members—triple the existing requirement—within three months of the laws passing.

If the Electoral Legislation Amendment (Party Registration Integrity) Bill 2021 became law, registered parties, including the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), would have little time to submit such lists.

With parliament still due to sit for numbers of weeks until early December, this could happen before the next federal election, which Morrison can call anytime before late May, 2022.

The SEP unequivocally condemns these bills and calls for a powerful campaign throughout the working class against them.

Without party registration, federal election candidates for the SEP and 35 other currently registered parties would be prevented from identifying their political affiliations on ballot papers.

That represents a direct attack on the basic democratic rights of all political parties. It also violates the rights of voters to know the political identities and programs of candidates.

More broadly, this is an assault on the rights of working class people to organise politically and contest elections to challenge the corporate and political establishment.

Unveiled with no public discussion, and virtually no coverage in the corporate media, these bills represent an unvarnished bid to block expression of the mounting popular disaffection with the traditional ruling parties. This alienation has been rising for decades, but has been intensified by the worsening COVID-19 disaster in Australia and globally.

The failure of federal and state governments, both Coalition and Labor, to protect the population from the catastrophe now accelerated by the Delta variant has precipitated a collapse in support for them. On every front—from refusing to implement lockdown restrictions quickly enough, to the inadequate and

shambolic vaccination and quarantine operations and growing resort to police-military measures—governments have subordinated public health, lives and livelihoods to the profit-crazed “reopening” drive of the capitalist ruling class.

A glimpse of the rising political storm was provided by survey results published on the front page of the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday, showing that “faith in the ability of government to handle the COVID-19 outbreak has deteriorated sharply.”

Approval of the Morrison government's response to the pandemic had “fallen off a cliff,” according to JWS director John Scales, whose company conducted the nationwide “True Issues” survey. The approval rating had plunged to 38 percent, from 66 percent in July 2020, when governments and the media were endlessly claiming that the Australian authorities had handled the pandemic better than the rest of the world.

The government's overall approval rating has not yet plunged to the 28 percent low it reached after the 2019–20 bushfire crisis, which exposed the government's indifference to the disastrous impact of the infernos and the underlying climate change, but is headed in that direction.

Nevertheless, no benefit has flowed to the opposition Labor Party, which has provided the Liberal-National Coalition government with “constructive” support throughout the pandemic. Average approval for the state governments, including the Labor administrations, has fallen from 64 percent in February to 53 percent.

On the electoral laws, as on virtually every other issue, a bipartisan front has emerged between the Coalition and Labor that could see the legislation quickly pushed through both houses of parliament. Labor has previously backed such measures and has refused to criticise the bills. In fact, Labor was consulted before the bills were introduced.

The government falsely claims that the trebling of the membership requirement was recommended by a parliamentary committee report on the 2019 election. That report was silent on the issue. But a 2016 election report by the same committee had recommended, with Labor's support, an increase in the membership requirement from 500 to 1,000.

That 2016 recommendation was also to apply to existing parliamentary parties, so it was not adopted! These parties, which are largely shells consisting of parliamentarians, staffers and aspiring MPs, could well have difficulty meeting the membership requirement.

In 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated party membership to be as low as 1 percent of the country's adult population. Trust in the major political parties was at an all-time low even before the bushfire and COVID crises, with a 2018 survey showing only 16 percent of respondents trusted them.

So instead, the opposite of the 2016 recommendation is now proposed: an increase to 1,500 for parties not represented in parliament, but with the existing parliamentary parties continuing to be exempted from any membership rule.

It was left to a junior government figure, the assistant minister for electoral matters, Ben Morton, to introduce the bills in parliament. In his brief speech, he declared that political parties not currently represented in parliament would have three months to demonstrate they have a "genuine base of community support."

But that is meant to be the function of elections—to gauge the level of voters' support. The setting of an arbitrary and discriminatory membership barrier to participation makes a mockery of elections themselves.

The government and Labor also insist that such rules are necessary to reduce confusion in the size and form of ballot papers. Yet the proliferation of new parties in recent years is a product of the growing distrust in the entire parliamentary set-up, which has implemented the dictates of the financial elite, presiding over escalating levels of social inequality and deteriorating working conditions and social services.

The Greens and some other smaller parliamentary parties have criticised the government's nakedly anti-democratic plan, but support the status quo. The Greens weakly dissented to the 2016 report, saying the already anti-democratic 500-member rule was "adequate."

In reality, the 500-member rule is reactionary itself. It was introduced as part of a package of measures by the Hawke Labor government in the 1980s to try to overcome the fracturing of support for the main parties and make it more difficult for working class people—without access to large funds and staff—to form new parties and contest elections.

The SEP has always opposed these laws, which also compel the SEP and other parties to hand over to the electoral authorities the details of their members. That opens up their members to surveillance and harassment, and violates the principle of secret ballots, which are meant to provide voters with privacy regarding their political affiliations.

As the SEP stated in 2002: "[T]he laws provide for state funding of political parties, both to prop up the flagging finances of the old parties and to give the authorities broad powers to pry into the affairs of new parties."

Since the 1980s, successive governments have also made it increasingly difficult for working people to stand for parliament, by setting substantial election candidates' deposits, which have increased in recent years to \$2,000 for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

For a party to nominate candidates for all House and Senate seats in a double dissolution election would cost \$454,000. This favours existing parliamentary parties with corporate-funded apparatuses. The most recent political donations statistics show that the Coalition reported a combined \$59 million in donations in 2019–20, and Labor more than \$50 million. The majority came from corporate entities, including mining companies and banks, which often donated to both parties.

Several other anti-democratic measures are contained in the latest four bills, notably to bar parties from using names already employed by other parties, to increase jail terms for "interference with political liberty" (which could now be constituted by "obscene or discriminatory abuse" or "harassment") and to shorten the period for pre-poll voting to a "maximum of 12 days."

The party name provisions could be applied against parties posturing as alternatives to the Coalition, such as the recently-registered "New Liberals," but would establish a wider rule that could, for example, bar parties from having "socialist" in their name, if that word had been previously claimed by another formation.

These bills escalate a series of attacks on fundamental democratic rights over the past two decades. This includes the 2017–2018 nationalist witch hunt, backed by the political and media establishment and the High Court, to expel members of parliament who held or were possibly entitled to dual citizenship. As a result, because of Australia's large-scale immigration since World War II, millions of people—perhaps half the population—are effectively disqualified from even standing for election.



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