

Right-wing “herd immunity” advocate becomes premier of Australia’s largest state

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Dominic Perrottet, a right-wing figure closely associated with the corporate drive to lift all lockdowns and COVID-19 safety restrictions, was yesterday installed as the premier of New South Wales (NSW). Perrottet overwhelmingly won Tuesday’s party room ballot to determine the leader of the Liberal Party, and consequently, of its coalition government with the Nationals.

The result means that amid the country’s worst coronavirus outbreak, the plans to lift the NSW lockdown and fully reopen the economy, beginning next Monday, will be overseen by a representative of the Liberals’ hard right faction who has opposed any imposts on private profit, including public health measures, throughout the pandemic.

It has often been said that the real content of a political crisis becomes apparent by what emerges out of it. Such is the case with Perrottet’s elevation and accompanying wholesale change in the leadership of the state government.

Gladys Berejiklian announced her sudden resignation as premier last Friday, after the state’s Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) told her it would be issuing a public statement naming her as a subject of investigation. Her forced removal has largely been presented in the media as the outcome solely of the allegations against her.

But as Berejiklian herself noted, the substantive accusations against her had been known publicly since last October. They hinge on the fact that she did not disclose a personal relationship with Darryl Macguire, a former Liberal MP who has since been accused of corruption.

That more was involved in Berejiklian’s ouster was indicated by the rapid departure of other senior figures in her government. Nationals leader and deputy premier John Barrilaro announced on Monday he was quitting politics, citing the stresses of public life. Andrew Constance, a cabinet minister, declared that he was leaving state politics to seek pre-selection for a federal electorate.

In effect, the government’s senior leadership stepped down within 48 hours. The upheaval was clearly linked to factional conflicts within the government, with senior

figures leaking against one another to the media for months.

More fundamentally, however, as statements from Perrottet have made clear, the cleanout is bound up with a broader shift from limited measures aimed at mitigating the worst effects of the pandemic, to a “let it rip” policy that allows the unfettered spread of COVID so that full profit-making activities can resume.

Throughout the pandemic, Berejiklian herself agitated against lockdowns and other restrictions, a policy upon which her political fate largely hinged. The NSW government’s refusal to institute any safety measures after Delta infections were first identified in mid-June, led to the country’s worst outbreak, which continues to result in daily infections of more than 500 in NSW and soaring case numbers exceeding 1,700 in the neighbouring state of Victoria.

Amid widespread opposition and fears of a collapse of the hospital system, Berejiklian was compelled to institute limited lockdown measures in late June. The inadequate restrictions, which never extended to widespread workplace closures, have nevertheless been a source of frustration in corporate circles.

Leaks to the media indicate that Perrottet has articulated these sentiments through much of the COVID crisis.

In June, when the Delta outbreak began, Perrottet, according to the ABC, was “keen to keep things as open as possible.” In July, he allegedly argued against any extension of lockdown measures, calling instead for a full reopening. At that point, fewer than 20 percent of the state’s adults were fully-vaccinated.

Berejiklian last month announced a “roadmap” for the end of restrictions, including the lifting of the lockdown on October 11, a further easing in November and a full “reopening” at the beginning of December. The plan, based on arbitrary inoculation levels that have failed to halt COVID surges internationally, was welcomed by the corporate and financial elite, but frustration was voiced over the pace of the “roadmap.”

Even before his formal installation yesterday, Perrottet

flagged a faster “reopening.” According to the *Australian*, on the very first day of his premiership, Perrottet was in discussions with Health Minister Brad Hazzard about “accelerating the return of schooling and easing restrictions around religious services.” The issue was to be discussed at the first cabinet meeting chaired by Perrottet today, along with a proposal to “reshape the state’s crisis cabinet to prioritise economic recovery and community wellbeing over day-to-day emergency management.”

This is an agenda dictated by the financial elite. Perrottet’s references to “economic recovery” are a euphemism for forcing teachers and students into classrooms as quickly as possible, and workers into their places of employment.

The “recovery” envisaged by the ruling class also involves a stepped-up offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of working people, and a further pro-business restructuring of workplace relations, centering on the destruction of full-time employment. Former Prime Minister John Howard endorsed Perrottet before yesterday’s ballot, on the grounds of his commitment to such “economic reform” and tax changes that would favour the wealthy.

Perrottet has previously railed against even the current poverty-level welfare payments for the unemployed and the poor, declaring that they result in “delinquency, dysfunction, crime and family breakdown.” He contemptuously labelled the working-class Sydney suburb of Mount Druitt, one of the city’s poorest, as a “tangle of pathologies.”

At the same time, he has campaigned against civil liberties, including abortion and same-sex marriage. Perrottet hailed fascist Donald Trump’s election as US president in 2016, describing it as a blow against “persecution by the left.”

While some corporate outlets have voiced nervousness over Perrottet’s extreme-right positions, these are closely connected to the agenda that the ruling class is demanding. Perrottet is tasked with imposing a reopening that the NSW authorities themselves predict will likely “overwhelm” the hospitals and result in mass infections and increased deaths.

Prior to Perrottet’s installation, a number of financial publications insisted that “strong leadership” was required to deliver this program, which is opposed by millions of workers, students and young people.

Official fears over mounting social anger were hinted at by the selection of Stuart Ayres as deputy NSW Liberal leader. It was intended to “send a message” to Sydney’s western suburbs, where he holds the seat of Penrith, that they would be represented by the new government. Residents of the city’s working-class western and southwestern suburbs have been hardest hit by the pandemic, with tens of thousands of infections, the majority of deaths and a massive police-military deployment.

Some commentators have also voiced concern over how rapidly Berejiklian’s government, previously touted as a model of stability, unravelled. The upheaval points to a deepening crisis of the Liberal-National Coalition, and the entire political establishment, which will inevitably find expression in other states and at the federal level. The resignations mean that three by-elections will need to be held in NSW under conditions in which the Coalition is already a minority government.

The Labor Party has again demonstrated that its priority is to help enforce the reopening and shore up the parliamentary set-up. Its NSW leader Chris Minns responded to the departure of Constance and Barrilaro by bemoaning the by-elections and urging them to “reconsider” their resignations and put the “interests of NSW first.” His concern is that the disarray in the government could embolden social opposition and result in the development of a movement of the working class against it.

The political turmoil and disarray in NSW once again underscore the motivations behind the ramming through in late August of anti-democratic election laws at the federal level by the Coalition government of Scott Morrison with Labor’s backing. By legislating to deregister non-parliamentary political parties unless they submit details of 1,500 members—triple the previous requirement, the political establishment is seeking to shore up the tottering two-party system by blocking alternative political avenues for the expression of widespread opposition.



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