

Australian Coalition's secret "net zero" deal points to intensifying political crisis

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After extraordinary backroom haggling for nearly two weeks, Australia's Liberal-National government claimed on Sunday to have reached an "in-principle" agreement between the two coalition partners on achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050, but refuses to release any details of the deal.

The secret pact was finally accepted by a narrow majority of the Nationals' 21 members of parliament after another marathon closed-door party room meeting on Sunday, just days before Prime Minister Scott Morrison was due to fly to Glasgow for the latest international climate change conference.

That it took so long for the fractured Nationals, a party based on mining and agri-business interests, to work out an arrangement with the Liberals, based on the financial elite, speaks to the government's fragility and the broader instability of the entire political establishment, which has been wracked by the fall of one government after another since 2007.

Morrison threatened to go to Glasgow without the Nationals' support, a move that could have shattered the Coalition. That forced Deputy Prime Minister and Nationals' leader Barnaby Joyce to push a pact through Sunday's meeting, despite deliberately making it known that he opposed the "net zero" commitment.

Both Morrison and Joyce have refused point-blank to provide any information about their agreement, deliberately keeping the public in the dark. "The details of that negotiated settlement will remain private," Joyce told reporters.

The protracted impasse over the net zero pledge was all the more remarkable because when Morrison released a "plan" on Tuesday outlining how the government proposed to meet the target by 2050, the document was a patent sham. It contained no new policies and no economic modelling.

All the proposed emission reductions are to come from massive existing government subsidies to big business, unproven technologies such as carbon-capture and storage, or unknown future technologies (see: "Australian government announces sham net zero carbon emissions climate target").

Three aspects of the concessions made to the Nationals are known. First, they were given an extra seat in the government's bloated 24-member cabinet, to be occupied by Resources Minister Keith Pitt, a vehement opponent of the net zero promise. Second, the Productivity Commission will conduct reviews every five years to assess the impact of the pledge on rural industries.

Third, Morrison ruled out raising the government's target of only trimming emissions by 26 to 28 percent by 2030. That was despite a new warning by the United Nations World Meteorological Organization that the current rate of increase in heat-trapping gases would result in temperature rises "far in excess" of even the limited 2015 Paris Agreement target of 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial average this century.

Some of the trade-offs handed to the Nationals have not been approved by the cabinet, so the deal could still unravel. The Liberals' Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Tuesday night that various measures would be made public only after cabinet had given them the green light.

In spruiking the government's "plan" yesterday, Morrison was at pains to insist that it would not affect the coal and gas mining and exports on which the resources companies, as well as the federal and state governments and the capitalist class as a whole, depend heavily for revenues and profits.

"There's no blank cheques here," Morrison said. "It

will not shut down our coal or gas production or exports... It will not cost jobs, not in farming, mining or gas, because what we're doing in this plan is positive things, enabling things.”

None of this has anything to do with a sudden concern by the government for global warming's existential threat to the planet and human civilisation.

A sharp shift by the global financial markets and the US and European capitalist powers to demand “net zero by 2050” undertakings by governments, under threat of investment withdrawals and trade penalties, has forced a rapid about-face by the Coalition government.

Only four years ago, Morrison, then treasurer, notoriously brandished a lump of coal in parliament, claiming that the nation's jobs and energy security depended upon a continuation of coal-fired power generators.

As recently as June, when Joyce ousted his predecessor Michael McCormack from the Nationals' leadership, the party room vote in support of Joyce was interpreted as signalling the party's opposition to “net zero.”

Joyce's latest two-faced stance—claiming to back the government's policy while opposing it inside his party—is blatantly designed to hold onto Nationals' seats in regional areas where they have postured as defenders of mining and farming jobs while championing the interests of the giant companies involved.

Joyce's manoeuvre could trigger open rifts in his party. Former Resources Minister Matt Canavan is already campaigning against the Coalition agreement, branding it a “bad deal” that meant higher taxes and more “red tape” for industry. Other Nationals MPs are reported to be planning to oppose the pact at the looming federal election, fearing losing their seats to right-wing populists from Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation or mining magnate Clive Palmer's United Australia Party.

At the same time, Joyce's patent lack of support for the net zero target undermines the government's capacity to sell its policy to voters or the major capitalist powers.

Paul Kelly, the editor-at-large of the Murdoch media's *Australian*, warned yesterday: “Joyce's credibility has been ruined within hours of the Nationals' partyroom decision. Climate change policy

is nothing without conviction and Joyce has no conviction.”

Business representatives welcomed the government's announcement but said it was not enough to attract investment in “green” technologies. Innes Willox, chief executive of the national employer association Ai Group called for “updated 2030 emissions projections.”

The inability of the parliamentary establishment to come to any agreement on climate change has been a factor in the increasing brittleness of the political system, particularly over the past 15 years. The impasse has come together with deepening popular hostility to the bipartisan program of supporting the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, attacking working class conditions, incarcerating asylum seekers on remote Pacific islands and imposing repressive “counter-terrorism” laws that eviscerate basic legal and democratic rights.

In 2007, the Howard Liberal-National government, in its dying days, adopted a pro-business carbon-trading scheme with Labor's support but was defeated in a landslide due to the widespread social and political disaffection. Then followed a succession of short-term Labor and Liberal-National prime ministers, from Labor's Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard to the Coalition's Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Morrison, none of whom could deliver any commitment to address the climate crisis.

This political crisis will only deepen. The Labor Party is backing the “net zero” fraud to be discussed in Glasgow and pitching for the support of the financial elite on climate policy, as on every other front.

Opposition leader Anthony Albanese said Morrison had outlined the “vibe” of a climate policy that had no new commitments. But Labor abandoned a previous, inadequate target of a 45 percent reduction in emissions by 2030 after the last federal election in 2019. Labor's vote fell to a near-record low, not because of its limited climate change policy, but because working class voters simply did not believe its rhetoric of asking the corporate elite for a “fair go.”



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