

Australian government deepens assault on democratic rights with voter ID bill

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The Australian government is trying to ram through another blatantly anti-democratic measure—a voter ID bill, intended to disenfranchise large numbers of working-class voters.

With virtually no notice, the Liberal-National Coalition government’s cynically misnamed Electoral Legislation Amendment (Voter Integrity) Bill 2021 was suddenly tabled in the House of Representatives on Thursday. The government plans to push it through both houses of parliament before December 2, in time for the looming federal election.

If successful, the bill would, for the first time, force voters to produce official identification, such as a driver’s licence—and be subjected to questioning by election officials about it—before being permitted to cast a valid ballot.

This is a desperate attempt to discourage or block the votes of thousands of disaffected voters, especially those most likely to have difficulty producing the required ID documents—first-time young voters, the elderly, the jobless and homeless, itinerant workers and indigenous people.

This anti-democratic measure follows new electoral laws designed to deregister parties without seats in parliament that were rammed through parliament in August with the backing of the opposition Labor Party. These bills suddenly trebled to 1,500 the number of names and details of members that non-parliamentary parties must submit to the electoral authorities in order to exercise the basic democratic right to have their party names on ballot papers, alongside those of their candidates.

This is taking place under conditions of a deepening political and social crisis, intensified by the profit-driven and criminally premature “reopening” of schools and workplaces in the midst of the global

COVID-19 pandemic. The ruling class and its political servants are taking unprecedented steps to silence working class opposition and prevent it from finding any expression in federal elections.

The fact that the party deregistration laws have been surrounded by a wall of media silence and elicited no campaign in opposition by other political parties, except for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), has encouraged the government to bring forward the voter ID bill.

The SEP is holding a public meeting tomorrow to step up this campaign. We appeal to all our readers and supporters to participate in this meeting and to become electoral members of the SEP to help us defeat these laws and ensure that a genuine socialist program can be advanced in elections.

There is no valid reason for the voter ID bill. Even by official estimates, the rate of multiple voting in Australia is infinitesimally small and has never compromised an election result in a single seat, let alone a general election.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) calculated that during the last federal election in 2019 the rate of multiple voting was 0.03 percent. It told an inquiry into the election that multiple voting is “by and large a very small problem” and usually involves mental health issues rather than deliberate fraud.

However, significant layers of the working class are already discouraged from voting, even though it is compulsory, and ID measures will likely compound this disenfranchisement. According to the AEC, only 78 percent of indigenous voters were enrolled to vote in 2020, for example. A 2014 inquiry by the New South Wales Electoral Commission reported that about 44 percent of Aboriginal adults living in the state’s urban areas have never held a driver’s licence.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's unstable government is obviously seeking to use these electoral laws to try to cling to office at the next election, which is due before May. Opinion polls indicate that it faces a landslide loss, driven by popular hostility to its record of widening social inequality, rush to force people to "live with" the deadly pandemic, escalating line-up behind US preparations for a catastrophic war against China, and opposition to any effective measures to halt the climate change disaster.

The laws are in line with similar profoundly anti-democratic moves in the US and UK to effectively strip millions of working class, poor and vulnerable people of the right to vote. Without any evidence of multiple voting or voter impersonation, such laws also lay the basis for Trump-style efforts to overturn election results on the back of cooked-up allegations of working-class voter fraud.

Shortly before flying out of the country for the G20 meeting in Rome and the climate change gathering in Glasgow, Morrison told reporters that voter ID was "not an earth-shattering proposal." It was "standard practice in liberal democracies" and "not one vote will be lost" as a result.

This is a fraud on both counts. First, although the bill allows for a variety of ID documents, such as bank cards and utility bills, and for those whose ID is challenged to cast an interim "declaration" vote that can be vetted by officials later, many people may not have such documents when they go to vote. The clear intent is to discriminate against such voters.

Second, it is the far right in the supposed "liberal democracies" that are moving in the same direction to restrict voting. Most notoriously, nearly 30 US states have this year introduced legislation restricting voting hours, early voting and the ability of voters to utilise absentee ballots, in response to Trump's "big lie" about widespread mail-in vote fraud.

Even before that, 34 of the 50 US states had imposed voter ID laws, especially since a reactionary 2013 Supreme Court ruling gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which had struck down arbitrary voting restrictions at the state and local levels. This offensive against voting rights has been aided by the abandonment by the Biden administration and the Democrats of a proposed federal ban on voter ID laws.

Boris Johnson's Tory government in Britain is on

the same path, with an Electoral Integrity Bill making photo ID mandatory for voting in elections. Roughly 11 million UK voters, or 24 percent of the electorate, do not own the passport or photographic driver's license that will be required to cast a vote.

The regressive character of the Morrison government's bill is further demonstrated by the fact that it was initially proposed by the far-right One Nation party of Senator Pauline Hanson. She is currently protesting that she has "had a gutful" of the Morrison government taking credit for her ideas.

While the Labor Party and the Greens have objected to the bill, Labor has only called for it to be delayed until after the scheduled election. Moreover, Labor created the political conditions for the bill by spearheading the passage of the other electoral laws in August.

Greens Senator Larissa Waters issued two media releases criticising the bill. She also raised objections when the earlier electoral laws were passed but the Greens have kept their mouths shut ever since, effectively lining up behind Labor, with whom they want to form a coalition government.

It is not accidental that it is the socialists, that is the SEP and its members and supporters, who are fighting the assault on fundamental democratic rights. As we have explained, the fight to defend—and extend—basic democratic rights is part and parcel of the struggle for socialism, that is, a genuinely democratic and egalitarian society based on the informed, active and articulate participation of all working people.



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