

Australian government in turmoil as MPs orient to fascistic anti-vaccination movement

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Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government is on the brink of unravelling, with dissident MPs threatening to block legislation unless Prime Minister Scott Morrison accedes to a series of demands.

The conflicts within the Coalition are the sharpest expression of a deepening crisis wracking the entire political establishment, including the opposition Labor Party.

As the year's final two-week parliamentary sitting began on Monday, two Coalition senators, Alex Antic and Gerard Rennick, declared they would vote against government policies unless Morrison supported federal legislation to override vaccine mandates introduced by a number of state and territory administrations.

Yesterday, they were joined by George Christensen, a Liberal National Party MP in the House of Representatives. If Christensen follows through on such threats, it will effectively reduce the Coalition to a minority government, dependent on support from crossbenchers and independents to pass anything in the lower house of parliament.

The prospect of a broader revolt was made clear on Tuesday, when five senators voted in favour of anti-vaccination legislation moved by the far-right Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, in opposition to the government.

According to the *Australian*, Morrison yesterday pleaded at a partyroom meeting for all Coalition MPs to drop the mandate issue, warning disunity could bring down the government. "If we surrender that, we surrender government," he reportedly said, warning that the Coalition divisions would result in a Labor Party victory in the federal election due by May.

Morrison's appeal has not quelled the conflict. The dissenting senators are bragging in the media about negotiating with cabinet ministers over concessions that would see them back government legislation. In the meantime, government bills, including anti-democratic voter identification laws and amendments to bolster draconian terror legislation, are in limbo. "Religious freedom" legislation, permitting businesses and religious schools to

discriminate on the basis of their faith, has been sent back to a senate committee.

The rifts have erupted in the context of right-wing protests over the past month against state vaccination mandates, as well as a bill in Victoria that would give future state administrations the power to declare future pandemics and institute public health measures.

The demonstrations have been actively promoted by sections of the corporate media as well as representatives of the Liberal and National parties. Prominent Liberal MPs have addressed protests in Victoria where there have been calls for the killing of state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews.

Mining magnate Clive Palmer's United Australia Party (UAP) and its leading member, government defector Craig Kelly, have been heavily involved in the campaign, as have other right-wing populist outfits, joined by openly neo-Nazi and fascistic groups.

Last week, Morrison dog-whistled to the protesters. While condemning the threats of violence, he said it was understandable that people had had a "gutful" of "governments telling them what to do" throughout the pandemic. The PM, who has falsely presented vaccines as a silver bullet to justify the pro-business lifting of all other safety measures, took a swipe at state vaccination mandates, presenting them as unreasonable.

The controversy over the mandates has an entirely manufactured character. In the first instance, credible scientists and medical experts universally agree on the efficacy of vaccines as a central component of tackling COVID-19.

The government, moreover, has mandated vaccines in the aged care and disability sectors, as well as areas of health under federal administration. Prior to the pandemic, the Coalition passed legislation effectively banning children from pre-schools if they were not inoculated against illnesses such as the measles and chicken pox and denying government support payments to their families.

The promotion of the anti-vaccine movement by some Coalition MPs and Morrison's overtures to it, are part of a

broader political agenda. The demonstrators are being used as a battering ram against popular anger over the dangerous reversal of lockdowns and other safety measures.

More broadly, they are being elevated in order to shift official politics even further to the right and to cultivate an extreme right-wing constituency that can be mobilised to intimidate the working class and emerging social and political struggles.

This has not developed overnight. Morrison, who became prime minister in a partyroom coup against “moderate” Liberal Malcolm Turnbull in 2018, has long protected the most right-wing layers of the Coalition, some of whom, such as Kelly, have sought to build a Trump-style populist movement. Morrison closely identified himself with the former fascistic US president, speaking at a campaign event with him in 2019 and long refusing to condemn Trump’s attempt to overthrow the last US election through the January 6 assault on the Capitol.

The overtures to an extreme right-wing base are partly motivated by fears that such elements will turn to other populist outfits, such as the UAP and One Nation. The attempts to retain a hold over this constituency have produced clashes with a “moderate” wing of the Liberal Party that describes itself as “fiscally conservative, but socially liberal” and is associated with the lifestyle politics of affluent upper-middle class layers in the major cities.

The latest tensions follow conflicts over climate policy. Almost half the National Party MPs, as well as a number of Liberals, opposed Morrison’s announcement of a zero-emission by 2050 policy, even though it will do nothing to reduce carbon output and will provide a cash bonanza for major corporations.

A November 23 article by the *Australian*’s editor-at-large, Paul Kelly, pointed to some of the factors underlying the conflict. Kelly bemoaned a “senseless” right-wing “revolt” that was undermining the prospect of “stable, competent and reliable government.”

The conflicts within the Coalition were “merely the latest manifestation of the fracture within conservative politics in Australia and across Western democracies as it searches for new meanings and aggressive tactics to combat the tide of progressivism, with Trump populism an element embedded in every centre-right party.”

Morrison was caught in a “pincer” between the “populist right” and the widespread public support for vaccine mandates. “The critical issue is whether the populist right still will align with Morrison at next year’s poll or bring him down,” but in chasing this support, the government was going against overwhelming public sentiment in favour of vaccine requirements.

The comments highlight the breakup of popular support

for the government, but the same goes for the entire political establishment. Polling results for Morrison are consistently at their lowest point since the pandemic began, but few register any rise in support for Labor.

The latest *Guardian* Essential data, for instance, found that 32 percent of respondents “trusted” neither Liberal, National nor Labor on economic management, a category that is growing across a host of surveys and polls.

Such statistics provide only a pale reflection of the mass hostility that exists to the major parties and their policies on a host of issues, from bipartisan support for the profits-before-lives pandemic policies, to pro-business economic restructuring, war and authoritarianism.

At the same time, there is longstanding dissatisfaction within the ruling elite over the inability of the Coalition government, and its predecessors, to implement sweeping austerity measures and a further corporate-driven overhaul of workplace relations.

These pressures, together with Australia’s frontline role in the US-led preparations for conflict with China, are fuelling the divisions, including speculation that Morrison may face a leadership challenge, possibly from Defence Minister Peter Dutton, who is increasingly prominent in the media.

The major parties are responding to the political crisis by lurching ever further to the right and escalating attacks on democratic rights. While sections of the Coalition elevate fascistic and far-right forces, Labor and the government came together in August to rush through anti-democratic electoral laws, aimed at blocking the candidates of so-called minor parties, without parliamentary representation, including the Socialist Equality Party, from contesting federal elections under their party name.



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