

Fracturing Australian government effectively closes down parliament

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Beset by internal revolts, mounting social tensions and the arrival of the highly-transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19, the Liberal-National Coalition government yesterday moved to virtually shut down parliament for the next eight months.

The government's disarray was underlined when it released next year's proposed parliamentary schedule. This allows only 10 or 14 sitting days for the entire first half of 2022, depending on when Prime Minister Scott Morrison calls a federal election, which must be held before the end of May.

By bringing forward the date for the annual budget from May to March 29, the government narrowed down its options for holding an election. It must now announce an early election in January, to be held in March before the budget, or delay as long as possible, making the call after the budget, which would mean an election in May.

Either way, the timetable seeks to effectively prevent parliamentary sessions, which might not resume until August if the election were conducted in May. At the same time, a succession of bills that the government had previously touted as major legislation are being put on hold, or hived off to parliamentary committees, until after an election.

This includes bills to give religious bodies the legal power to disregard anti-discrimination laws, to set up a token anti-corruption commission that will protect politicians from scrutiny, to force social media companies to identify people posting allegedly defamatory comments, and to introduce historic anti-democratic vote ID provisions.

With seven Coalition MPs having already voted against the government on various measures last week, and numbers of others still refusing to vote for any government legislation, the Coalition has essentially lost its majority, producing another "hung" parliament.

Staggering from crisis to crisis, the government is anxious to avoid any parliamentary debate that would further expose the rifts tearing it apart. It is also extending the sidelining of parliament since the pandemic erupted in early 2020. Parliament barely sat that year, displaced by an unelected "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory leaders, most from the Labor Party.

This week marks the end of the last two-week parliamentary

session for 2021, during which several months-long breaks also occurred between parliamentary proceedings.

There is no guarantee that this government will last until an election. Morrison hopes to become the first prime minister to survive for a full three-year term since John Howard lost his own seat in the Coalition's landslide defeat in 2007. But the events in Canberra are an intensification of the instability of the parliamentary order over the past decade, during which social inequality has soared, working class conditions have worsened and the dangers of war and global warming have escalated.

While the opposition Labor Party has criticised the lack of parliamentary sitting days for 2022, it is providing bipartisan support to the fracturing government on all the major fronts, and equally trying to prevent any public debate. Typically, Labor's caucus decided today not to oppose the supposed "religious discrimination" bill if the government brings on a vote, while saying Labor would reserve its position until after a parliamentary committee report in February.

In particular, Labor supports the government's determination to push ahead with fully "reopening" the economy for the sake of corporate profit despite the worsening global pandemic and rapid emergence of Omicron infections in Australia.

Likewise, Labor fully supports the signing of the AUKUS pact that underpins accelerated preparations for a catastrophic US-led war against China, the pouring of billions of dollars into the pockets of the corporate elite throughout the pandemic, and the fraud that government and corporate pledges of zero carbon emissions by 2050 will avert the climate change disaster.

This bipartisan front extends to trying to prop up the increasingly discredited and distrusted political establishment itself. With media polls showing Labor's popular support still languishing at the historic lows of the 2019 federal election, despite disintegrating support for Morrison and the Coalition, Labor helped the government impose new anti-democratic electoral laws.

These laws, rushed through parliament jointly by Labor and the Coalition in August, set an abrupt three-month deadline for the deregistration of all parties without seats in parliament unless they submit to the election authorities the names and details of 1,500 members—trebling the previous requirement—by December 2.

Above all, these laws are directed at preventing the rising social, economic and political discontent from taking a more conscious form in support for the alternative socialist perspective and policies advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). If the SEP is deregistered, it will be unable to stand candidates under the party's name in the looming election, identifying them as genuine socialist representatives.

This is under conditions in which the rapid spread of the Omicron variant around the world, and in Australia, will intensify the opposition in the working class, already seen especially among anxious and angry teachers, parents and healthcare workers.

Despite a media propaganda campaign, promoting individual "freedom," there is deep hostility to the deadly risk to health and lives presented by the demand of big business and its media and political mouthpieces that the population, young and old, must learn to "live with" COVID-19, no matter what terrible mutations inevitably emerge.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the leader of the agribusiness and mining-based National Party, blatantly advanced the government's pro-business agenda yesterday. "We can't just shut down every time there's a new variant, because there's going to be new variants, and they're going to continue on," he declared. Otherwise "the economy won't work."

New South Wales Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet had a similar message. "We need to learn to live alongside the virus and to live alongside the various strains of the virus that will come our way," he said.

In other words, people must "live with," or die with, the pandemic, no matter how deadly the mutations become.

That is Labor's policy too. Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews today took a further step toward meeting the demands of the financial markets by insisting that vaccine mandates would be temporary. He boasted that "just over a few weeks ago, we took all the rules off pretty much except for masks in a number of sensitive settings."

The worldwide emergence of Omicron is a devastating indictment of these policies, which are being pursued by capitalist governments on every continent. Their refusal to take the necessary, and scientifically proven, measures to eliminate the virus, and their profit-driven rush to prematurely reopen economies has turned the globe into a COVID-19 incubation dish, not least in the poorest countries with the worst public health resources of all.

Nevertheless, Australia's governments are pushing ahead with reopening international and domestic borders, and lifting all basic safety measures, even mask-wearing and contact tracing. That is despite potentially fatal and long-lasting Delta infections still running at more than 1,000 a day nationally because of these criminal government responses.

These governments are defying the latest warning issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Contrary to all the

unsubstantiated misinformation being propagated by governments and the media about Omicron being a "mild" variant, the WHO said yesterday it was already clear that Omicron would produce a "very high risk" of infection surges that would overwhelm public hospitals, leading to increased morbidity and mortality, regardless of any change in the severity of the virus.

Propped up by the complicity of Labor and the trade unions—which are trying to keep suppressing the resistance of workers—the Morrison government is desperately attempting to impose the further economic restructuring demanded by the corporate boardrooms.

Representing the largest corporations operating in the country, Business Council chief executive Jennifer Westacott issued a statement yesterday demanding that the federal, state and territory governments "stay the course" on reopening, in order to give "businesses clarity and certainty." She insisted: "That means no state-wide lockdowns and domestic border closures that throw peoples' lives into chaos."

After a meeting of its national security cabinet last night, the Morrison government confirmed that it would not reverse the "reopening roadmap," except to "pause" for 14 days, until December 15, the return of overseas workers and international students, and a planned "travel bubble" with Japan and South Korea.

Amid this deepening political crisis, the SEP is continuing its fight against the party deregistration laws, and campaigning for the widest possible working class support for, and involvement in, the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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