Australian government in “chaos” as pandemic intensifies political disarray

Mike Head
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With the highly-transmissible Omicron variant of COVID already spreading, there are growing signs of a deepening political crisis in Australia after more than a decade of unstable and short-lived governments.

The Liberal-National Coalition government is wracked by rifts and desertions, yet there is continuing low popular support for the opposition Labor Party, accompanied by rising distrust in the entire pro-business parliamentary establishment. Polls show Labor’s primary vote still languishing at the near-record lows of around 33 percent that it obtained in the last federal election in 2019.

This raises the prospect of yet another minority or near-minority government after the looming next election, which must be held by May. Since 2007, when Coalition Prime Minister John Howard was so detested that he lost his own seat, no prime minister has lasted a full three-year parliamentary term.

The last two-week session of federal parliament for 2021 ended on Thursday with Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government in obvious disarray and its legislative program in tatters, unable to push through its key bills.

In order to cling to office, the government has virtually suspended parliament. It has scheduled only 10 sitting days for the first half of 2022.

An unprecedented nine government MPs voted against the government on various issues during the final fortnight session. Several declared they would not vote for any government bill at all unless the government took action to overturn even the limited pandemic mask mandates set by state and territory governments.

Many government members have deserted the ship, declaring their intentions not to contest the federal election. By the end of Thursday, the number of government ministers or ex-ministers issuing such statements had risen to six, including Health Minister Greg Hunt and former Attorney-General Christian Porter.

Another six backbench MPs had done the same. So the government is losing 12 representatives altogether, with more likely to go before the election. Bitter internal faction fights are underway to pre-select Coalition candidates for an array of seats.

In the dying hours of the session, the main corporate media outlets gave prominence to claims of abuse made against Education Minister Alan Tudge by his female ex-media adviser. That forced Morrison to stand aside Tudge, who has been a close supporter of both Morrison and Defence Minister Peter Dutton, pending an in-house investigation into the allegations.

Sections of the ruling class appear to be losing confidence in the government’s capacity to deliver the agenda that big business is demanding. That is first, a guarantee of no more pandemic lockdowns, no matter how deadly Omicron and other variants become, and second, a stepped-up offensive against working-class conditions in order to further boost profits.

The words being used by the media to describe the government include “chaos” and “a train wreck,” beset by “division,” “sabotage,” “disloyalty” and “insurrection.”

Among the bills that the government had promised but was forced to shelve, at least until after the election, were: to permit religious bodies to defy anti-discrimination laws; to establish a token corruption commission to protect government politicians from accusations; and to impose blatantly anti-democratic voter ID legislation designed to disenfranchise many working-class and marginalised voters.

With the government falling apart, Labor’s response has been to step up its efforts to win the backing of the financial elite, while joining hands with the government to try to shore up the two-party political system that has ruled the country since World War II.

Yesterday, in his latest pro-business pitch, Labor leader Anthony Albanese released a policy to supposedly reduce carbon emissions by 43 percent by 2030, mainly by handing out massive subsidies to companies. Albanese boasted that the policy was based on what business leaders themselves had proposed! The Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest corporations operating in Australia, immediately hailed the policy as “sensible and workable.”

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Labor also struck a cynical and self-serving deal with the government to postpone the voter ID bill, which had provoked widespread outrage, while helping the Coalition ram through another anti-democratic electoral law. This bill retrospectively compels environmental groups and charities to hand over lists of donors for campaigns in support of a growing number of "independent" candidates trying to exploit the public disaffection.

This deal extends Labor's record of backing laws to try to block any challenge to the two-party duopoly. In August, Labor helped spearhead laws to deregister parties not currently represented in parliament unless they filed lists of 1,500 members—triple the previous requirement—by this week. The Socialist Equality Party is conducting a determined campaign against these laws.

Since September's unveiling of the AUKUS pact against China, Labor also has repeatedly reiterated its commitment to the US military alliance. It is backing the Biden administration's escalation of Washington's confrontation with China, raising the danger of a catastrophic nuclear war.

Crucially, from the standpoint of corporate profit, Labor leaders, including Victorian state Premier Daniel Andrews, have pledged to continue lifting any remaining COVID safety restrictions, and to keep all schools open. That is despite the ongoing Delta wave in Victoria and New South Wales, which has started to leak into other states and territories, and the rapid emergence of Omicron cases.

An *Australian Financial Review* editorial on December 2 vented the anxiety within the ruling capitalist class over the government's disarray and accused the political elite of failing to impose a "pro-growth" agenda. It complained that the "low-brow and low-energy election may not even produce a win. If it delivers a hung parliament—where Greens or independents hold sway—then three years of greater paralysis beckon."

The editorial demanded economic restructuring to overcome the impact of China's moves to lessen its reliance on huge Australian imports of iron ore, and to claw back from social spending some $1.3 trillion in state and federal government debt, primarily incurred in bailing out business throughout the pandemic.

This is a warning of the big business dictates to be unveiled after the election, regardless of whether the next government is led by the Coalition or Labor.

The ruling class agenda was echoed in today's *Australian* by editor-at-large Paul Kelly. He insisted that the "bedraggled" government's fate depended on its ability to deliver "economic recovery." Above all, that meant enforcing Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's declaration this week: "Lockdowns are behind us."

Kelly said the government had to "manage" Omicron "without premiers blowing up the place by reverting to populist repression." That last phrase, however, reveals the fear in ruling circles of the mounting discontent in the working class, especially among teachers, parents and health workers, over the failure of governments to protect the population from the pandemic. This anger has been intensified by the infections already raging in schools, hundreds of which have had to partially or temporarily close since being reopened in the past six weeks.

Nervously, Kelly also pointed to the years of stagnation in wage levels, citing a warning from the big business BCA itself that "people don't feel they are getting ahead." As figures like Kelly are fully aware, the pandemic has seen the social gulf between wealthy and the working class widen to staggering and ever-more glaring levels that have triggered workers' struggles around the globe.

One factor is holding back a social explosion. Australia's trade union apparatus, which is tied closely to Labor, is doing everything it can to keep suppressing strikes and unrest, as it has for decades.

This week, the Transport Workers Union struck a deal with FedEx to end the last of a series of stoppages against logistics companies, while Maritime Union of Australia national secretary Paddy Crumlin ruled out dockworkers taking industrial action at Patrick Terminals ahead of Christmas.

Appearing on the Seven Network's "Sunrise" program after Morrison had threatened legal action against stoppages, host David Koch asked Crumlin: "So, no industrial action before Christmas?" Crumlin replied: "No, of course not."

This is under conditions in which any eruption of working-class struggle or resistance to the homicidal "live with the virus" drive would clearly shatter not just the Morrison government but the capacity of a Labor government to deliver the requirements of the corporate boardrooms.

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