

Omicron disaster intensifies political instability in Australia

Mike Head
1 February 2022

The rising toll of COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths being caused by the profit-driven “let it rip” program inflicted by Australia’s federal, state and territory governments is deepening the political disgust toward the entire parliamentary establishment.

This week, the *Australian’s* Newspoll became the latest media survey to indicate collapsing public support for Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s disintegrating Liberal-National Coalition government. But such polls provide only a distorted view of the underlying political crisis.

Since December, the pandemic has become far worse than ever in Australia and many other parts of the world. Nearly 2.2 million people—almost 10 percent of Australia’s population—have been infected in 2022 so far and almost 1,600 have died.

This disaster is not the result of “mistakes” by governments as Morrison claimed today. The pandemic is raging into its third year because of the opposition of the corporate ruling elite and its governments to the measures needed to protect the population and eliminate the virus.

The bipartisan “National Cabinet’s” insistence on letting Omicron loose is bringing to a new level the breakdown of the country’s two-party system, on which capitalist rule has rested throughout most of the past century.

The reopening of schools and universities, despite every government, both Coalition and Labor, admitting the certainty of new infection outbreaks, is intensifying the anger and opposition among educators, parents, students and other working people to the deliberate “live with the virus” program.

One measure of the underlying historic crisis is that if the Morrison government survives until the looming federal election, which must be held by May—and that is not certain—it will be the first government to last for a full parliamentary term since the 2007 landslide defeat of the long-hated Howard Coalition government.

With little popular support for a Labor Party-led government, except in the negative sense of wanting to oust the Coalition, there are mounting fears in the ruling class

that any election will result in an unstable, minority government, unable to overcome working-class discontent and opposition.

In its editorial yesterday, the Murdoch media’s *Australian* raised the spectre of “a chaotic hung parliament, with [Labor Party leader] Anthony Albanese as prime minister.” The newspaper declared: “The last thing Australians need as the nation claws its way back to full recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is political instability.”

The editorial referred to evident support for “pro-climate independents.” But the real concern is that the “recovery”—which means the removal of all health safety measures in order to further boost profits and billionaire wealth—could see the disaffection and turn toward a socialist perspective, which is fought for only by the Socialist Equality Party.

The Newspoll confirms that the Morrison government’s ratings have fallen dramatically since Omicron was allowed to spread in December. Support for the Coalition has dropped to 34 percent, its lowest level since 2018, when Morrison ousted his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull. According to the *Australian*, no government has ever recovered from such a low result so close to an election.

Labor’s primary vote lifted three points to 41 percent, equalling its highest result since 2018. Yet that was primarily because Newspoll forces “uncommitted” voters to opt for one party or another. A previous Resolve poll, published by the *Guardian*, estimated the “uncommitted” vote at 27 percent, pointing to the wider political alienation.

According to Newspoll, the Greens, who want to join a Labor coalition government, barely moved, rising one point to 11 percent, the anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party stagnated on 3 percent, and “independents and minor parties” fell two points to 11 percent.

By the poll’s calculations, this produced a “two-party-preferred” lead for Labor of 56–44 over the Coalition. This is the largest margin for the official opposition since September 2018, and a six-point “blowout” on the 53–47 recorded in the final poll of 2021, published on December 6.

That would suggest Labor could win an election with a sizeable majority, assuming a uniform swing to Labor from the 2019 election. But Labor lost that seemingly unlosable election. Its vote fell to an historic low of 33 percent, despite gaining ground in affluent electorates, because working-class people did not believe its phony rhetoric about providing a “fair go” against big business.

Morrison’s net satisfaction ratings plummeted 11 points to minus 19, his worst ranking since February 2020 following that summer’s bushfire disaster. But there is no enthusiasm for Labor. Albanese, who has had negative approval ratings since becoming Labor leader in 2019, could only record a net satisfaction level of zero.

Parliament is scheduled to resume next Tuesday with Morrison’s government in even greater disarray than when it shut down parliament in the first week of December. Already then the government was on its knees, beset by internal rifts and unable to pass key bills through parliament unless it had Labor’s backing.

Another senator, Sam McMahon from the Northern Territory, deserted the government last Friday, vowing to sit as an independent. That brings to 10 the number of Coalition or ex-Coalition MPs who could vote against the government on various measures, mostly on a far-right basis, and to 13 the number departing at the election, including six ministers.

Infighting is also wracking the Liberal Party in Morrison’s home state of New South Wales (NSW), where the party has not yet nominated candidates for six key seats. Factional chiefs this week rejected a plan by Morrison to parachute in hand-picked nominees.

Parliament itself has become almost unworkable. The government is virtually shutting it down, only scheduling seven sitting days this month, then a three-day budget session starting on March 29. The government had hoped to call an early election in March, but the outrage over Omicron has shattered those plans, resulting in a lame duck parliament that can barely function.

Fuelling the popular disgust is the fact that in most states and territories, including Queensland and Western Australia, governments won re-election by posturing as protectors of the population from the pandemic, only to then join the National Cabinet “roadmap” to “live with the virus.”

Adding to the crisis is the prospect of even holding an election amid the ongoing pandemic. During the past week, the Australian Electoral Commission has warned of lengthy queues at polling stations and the likelihood of heavy postal voting, which could delay the declaration of election results.

For the working class, the burning problem is that Labor provides no alternative. In fact, Labor and its trade union partners have enforced the Morrison government’s policies throughout the pandemic, from backing the handouts of

more than \$400 billion to the corporate elite to the brutal economic reopening drive.

That unity is epitomised by the daily close collaboration between the Coalition’s NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, a detested right-wing figurehead, and his Victorian counterpart, Daniel Andrews. Together, they are dismantling COVID-19 safety measures and forcing teachers and students back into classrooms in order to get their parents back into workplaces, for the sake of corporate profit.

Labor is only criticising the Morrison government from the right, for not going far enough to subsidise businesses and meet their demands for rapid antigen tests as a means of pushing workers back into production. At the National Press Club last week, Albanese again pleaded for the support of big business, vowing to use the pandemic crisis to implement another wave of pro-market economic restructuring, deepening that inflicted by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and the unions from 1983 to 1996.

Labor also has lined up completely behind the Coalition’s frontline role in backing the Biden administration’s provocative confrontations with China and Russia, raising the danger of a nuclear World War III. Yesterday, on Melbourne radio 3AW Albanese reiterated Labor’s complete agreement with the government on all the US allegations against China and declared that he stood with Taiwan against Beijing’s supposed increasing military threats.

Amid the pandemic disaster, soaring enrichment of the wealthy at the expense of the working class, and war drum-beating, Labor and the Coalition joined hands last August to pass anti-democratic electoral laws designed to deregister parties with no members in parliament. The escalating political crisis underscores the necessity for the campaign being waged by the SEP against these laws as “a naked attempt to prop up the existing parliamentary parties and stifle popular rising discontent, which has been intensified by the disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.”



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