

Australian government in meltdown months out from federal election

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The attempt by Prime Minister Scott Morrison to overcome his government's deep political crisis with a "reset" speech at the National Press Club on Tuesday has failed spectacularly. Ongoing factional conflicts within Morrison's Liberal Party have erupted into public warfare, and it is an open question whether the PM will even survive until the next federal election, likely to be held in May.

Morrison's speech had two aims.

Firstly, to try and dampen down mass popular anger over his central role in letting the virus rip, which has created the country's worst COVID surge since the pandemic began. His and the government's opinion poll results are the lowest since Morrison's installation as prime minister in August 2018. And secondly, to convince the ruling elite that his government is capable of enforcing the continued reopening drive and the pro-business restructuring that is to accompany it.

If anything, the speech only made things worse on both fronts.

Amid ongoing mass infection, illness and death resulting from the decision of governments to allow Omicron to spread in December, Morrison acknowledged for the first time: "I haven't got everything right" and "I'll take my fair share of the criticism and the blame."

But the PM refused to apologise for the catastrophe, in line with his pitch to the corporate elite that he will continue the policies that caused it. "You must be prepared to listen to that advice, but also to take the decisions that strike the right balance," he said.

Later, during the question session, Morrison claimed that his government had been "too optimistic" about Omicron and, "We could have communicated more clearly about the risks and challenges that we still faced." His only regret was that the military was not called in earlier to run the vaccination operation—which points to discussions and plans to deploy the military more generally in the event of social unrest.

To claim optimistic misunderstanding is a fraud. The government, backed by the entire "National Cabinet" of

federal, state and territory leaders, deliberately misled the public. They all insisted that the Omicron variant of COVID-19 was "mild," in order to justify the lifting of nearly every safety restriction, followed by the reopening of schools, in order to push workers back into workplaces despite mass infections.

Even after 1,519 COVID fatalities were reported in January alone, including more than 450 aged care residents, Morrison contemptuously declared that "our health response has ensured that our health and aged care system has stood up to the global pandemic." To add insult to this dismissal of the death toll, he then promised the over-worked and abysmally-paid aged care workers two \$400 "retention" payments before May, the likely election month, while rejecting calls for wage rises.

Morrison once more attempted, as he has done for two years, to hold out the prospect of "locking in our economic recovery" in 2022, saying his government stood for "strong economic management." That means further driving up corporate profits at the expense of the jobs, wages and conditions of workers.

Morrison also sought to incite fears about "a direct threat to Australia's economic and security interests." He did not name China. But he highlighted the signing of the AUKUS agreement, a military alliance directed against Beijing, the "powering up" of the "Quad," a quasi-military pact with the US, Japan and India to confront China, and the sealing of military or "strategic partnership" agreements with India, South Korea, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea.

In other words, the key planks of Morrison's appeal were that he would boost the fortunes of the ultra-wealthy, and ramp-up a "national security" agenda involving further attacks on democratic rights and an escalation of Australia's involvement in US-led wars.

Even at the National Press Club event, there were indications that sections of the ruling class and the Liberal Party itself do not think Morrison is up to the job.

Network 10 and *Australian* journalist Peter van Onselen, who has connections inside the party and is a figurehead of

the Murdoch press, read out text messages, apparently two years old, in which the then New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian described Morrison as “a horrible, horrible person” who was more concerned about political point-scoring than peoples’ lives. In reply, an unnamed cabinet minister called him a fraud and “a complete psycho.”

Such texts could have been leaked only by senior figures in the Liberal-National Coalition, which is increasingly wracked by factional in-fighting.

Within days of the speech, the conflicts have openly erupted. Such is the rancor that a few months out from the federal election, the Liberal Party has been unable to finalise preselection for candidates in more than a dozen seats. Some of them are crucial electorates, including Hughes in Sydney, where the sitting member Craig Kelly defected from the government last year, and Warringah, the seat previously held by former Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Sitting MPs are facing potential challenges to their candidacy, including Environment Minister Sussan Ley, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke, and prominent North Sydney MP Trent Zimmerman. Thirteen others, including six ministers, are retiring from federal politics, prompting media references to rats fleeing a sinking ship.

In line with Van Onsolen’s decision to drop a bomb at the National Press Club, the Murdoch media, previously a key support of Morrison, has adopted an increasingly skeptical tone regarding his political viability. Similar opinions are being voiced by leading commentators at the rival Nine Media group. There are broader fears of a potential bust up, both of the Liberal Party and its governing coalition with the Nationals.

Under these conditions, Labor is presenting itself as the vehicle best suited to implement the demands of the financial elite, for austerity, militarism and forcing the population to “live with the virus.”

Its leader, Anthony Albanese has repeatedly harkened back to the 1980s, when the Hawke and Keating Labor governments formed a tripartite alliance with the unions and big business to enforce sweeping economic deregulation and restructuring.

Albanese was installed as leader after Labor lost the “unlosable” election of 2019 because broad sections of working people, as hostile as they were to the Liberal-Nationals, did not buy its phony “fair go” rhetoric.

Labor has responded by shifting even further to the right, dumping token taxation measures and forswearing any demagogic references to social inequality. Instead, Albanese has insisted that Labor is a party of “aspiration.”

Throughout the pandemic, Labor has largely marched in lockstep with the government, supporting and enforcing the

profit-driven pandemic policies, the massive handouts to big business, and attacks on democratic rights, including the forcible deregistration of smaller political parties without parliamentary representation. On foreign policy, Labor insists that it could work more closely with the Biden administration, as the US prepares for war with Russia and China to try and reverse the economic decline of American capitalism through military means

Labor’s right-wing pitch demonstrates that the upcoming election will resolve nothing for workers and young people. That is why in the deepening political crisis and the federal election, the working class must adopt an independent position, against the Coalition, Labor and the entire parliamentary set-up.

The needless sacrifice of lives globally in the pandemic has exposed the moral and social bankruptcy of capitalism and all its political servants. An entirely opposed political perspective has to be adopted and fought for. That is a socialist one, based on the protection of health and lives, not private profit, and the total reorganisation of economic and social life by workers’ governments.

This is the perspective fought for only by the Socialist Equality Party. In order to advance this program in the broadest possible manner, we will be standing candidates in the federal election, despite the new anti-democratic electoral laws pushed through parliament jointly by Labor and the Coalition.

But there must be no illusions that socialism can be achieved through the parliamentary apparatus of capitalism. Indeed, the electoral laws are a warning of the anxiety and determination of the ruling class to silence any opposition from workers and youth. A new revolutionary leadership must be built in the working class to overturn the entire failed capitalist order.



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