

# Australian government at war with itself as parliament resumes

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With federal parliament holding its first sitting since the summer recess tomorrow, the Liberal-National Coalition government is in its deepest crisis since Prime Minister Scott Morrison was installed as leader in an August 2018 party-room coup.

There is intense speculation that Morrison may be deposed before the federal election, which is supposed to be held by May. The position of deputy PM and Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce is also in peril. Intrigues and backstabbing are rife. Parliamentary discussion on any government policy threatens to erupt into open civil war.

In the final parliamentary sittings of 2021, in late November and early December, the government was wracked by divisions and paralysed by revolts of backbench MPs who threatened to withhold their votes, some because of their opposition to limited vaccine mandates.

Two months on and its situation is far worse. Together with the state Labor Party and Liberal-National government leaders, Morrison spearheaded the lifting of all COVID safety restrictions in December, and allowed the Omicron variant to enter the country. This has resulted in more than two million infections and unprecedented deaths over the past six weeks. That was after limited public health measures had repeatedly suppressed mass transmission in the first two years of the pandemic.

The COVID catastrophe has intensified deep hostility among working people toward Morrison, the Coalition and the entire parliamentary set-up, including the opposition Labor Party, which has offered his government “constructive” support throughout the pandemic. Popular fury over the pro-business “let it rip” policies is intersecting with longstanding anger over social inequality and a decades-long onslaught on jobs, wages and working conditions. These sentiments are fuelling the political crisis, which has seen Morrison and the government register their lowest polling results in years.

Last Tuesday, Morrison delivered a “reset” speech to the National Press Club, which included highly conditional admissions that the government had “not got it right” on

every question during the pandemic, accompanied by lies that it was caught unawares by Omicron. Morrison said the government would focus on a militarist and “national security” agenda and “economic recovery.” These are codewords for the drive to war against China, further attacks on the democratic rights of the population and increasing corporate profits.

The attempt to defuse popular hostility failed entirely. The bid to convince the ruling elite that Morrison’s government remains a viable instrument for enforcing its agenda of full reopening and stepped-up pro-business restructuring seems to have gone the same way.

In the question period, Peter van Onselen, a journalist for the *Australian* and Network Ten, cited text messages between former New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian and an unnamed federal cabinet minister. The latter allegedly described Morrison as a “psycho” and a “fraud.”

After days of speculation over the identity of Berejiklian’s interlocutor, former Labor Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr claimed on Twitter last night that it was Defence Minister Peter Dutton. Dutton has denied the charge, while Carr has doubled down, declaring the information is from a “strong source.”

Carr, who remains a prominent figure in Labor Party circles, undoubtedly has his own motives for making the claim. He has, however, been a political insider for almost 50 years, with extensive connections inside the state apparatus and both major parties.

The allegation that it was Dutton, if true, is explosive. As well as defence minister, Dutton is government leader in the House of Representatives and was previously in charge of the powerful Home Affairs ministry. After Morrison, he is among the most prominent members of the government.

If he did author the texts, and gave van Onselen the go ahead to release them at the Press Club appearance, it was a decision to undermine Morrison’s leadership and blow-up his “reset.” In his text accusing Dutton, Carr wrote: “If PM Morrison has one more week in free fall the prospect of a

leadership change pre-election is real. Party rules don't count if most MPs think you will lead them to defeat."

Other details point to a destabilisation campaign targeting Morrison. The texts are reportedly two-years-old, relating to the 2019–2020 bushfire crisis. Portions of Berejiklian's side of the exchange were published mid-last year. Van Onselen has said he received the messages directly from the "very senior Liberal" minister, who previously told him not to release the other side of the exchange. Now, amid Morrison's deep-going crisis, it appears that advice has changed.

For the past year, Dutton has been heavily promoted by the *Australian*, the national Murdoch flagship and one of van Onselen's employers. This has been in line with the ratcheting-up of Australia's involvement in US preparations for war against China. Dutton, who initiated the 2018 leadership challenge against Malcolm Turnbull, which Morrison ultimately won, harbours his own leadership ambitions. Notably, the *Australian*, a long-time supporter of Morrison, has begun expressing doubts about his political viability and his government's ability to impose the ruling class agenda of stepped-up economic restructuring.

Deputy Prime Minister Joyce was last week caught up in his own texting scandal, with messages he wrote last year describing Morrison as a "hypocrite" and a "liar" now published in the press. He apologised and offered to resign, but Morrison adopted a pose of forgiveness.

The National's federal party-room is holding a pre-parliament meeting this afternoon. In further leaks, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported yesterday that this would feature "candid" conversations about the need for Joyce to "lift his game." Speaking this morning, Joyce's predecessor Michael McCormack said he would not press for a leadership spill before the election, but would "see what happens."

Various fissures threaten to dominate parliament. Several "moderate" Liberal MPs are publicly declaring that they may vote against the government's long-stalled "religious freedom bill" on the grounds that it could facilitate discrimination. Several hard-right MPs have hinted that they may refuse to vote with the government, as they threatened last year, because of their opposition to limited vaccine mandates.

The government has been able to survive its unraveling, thus far, only thanks to Labor and the trade unions. Labor has provided bipartisan support throughout the pandemic, including for the government's massive handouts to the corporations, its endangerment of health and lives in the interests of profit, and the ratcheting up of the US-led confrontation with Beijing.

Above all, Labor and the unions have done everything they

can to prevent the anger of ordinary people from erupting into a political movement of the working class. The unions have suppressed virtually all industrial action, while enforcing the dictates of governments and employers, including during the current Omicron surge. Labor joined with the government last August to pass anti-democratic electoral laws, aimed at deregistering alternative parties, including the Socialist Equality Party.

Amid the government chaos, Labor leader Anthony Albanese is presenting himself as a voice of calm and stability. He has called upon the unknown minister who denounced Morrison to identify himself. Seemingly defending the prime minister, Albanese said Joyce's position was "untenable" after his attacks on Morrison.

"This is such a distraction. The dysfunction and the dishonesty and disunity is meaning this government is paralysed in taking the action that really does concern Australia," Albanese declared last night.

Albanese is pitching Labor to the ruling elite as the party best able to press ahead with "live with the virus" program and the offensive against workers' pay and conditions in a tripartite alliance with the unions and big business. He has also stated that Labor would work more closely with the Biden administration in the US, as it carries out reckless provocations against Russia and China.

The interests of working people find no expression in the Coalition, Labor or the parliamentary set-up as a whole. All are committed to a profits-before-lives agenda, and to war. The anti-democratic electoral laws are a warning that the official parties will respond to mounting opposition, and the emerging struggles of the working-class, with a further turn to authoritarianism.

Workers and young people must strike out on a new path, in opposition to the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it defends. The fight for health and safety, along with the struggles for decent pay and conditions and an end to war, require a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not the profit interests of a tiny corporate elite.



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