

Australian PM's defeat on religious discrimination bill deepens political crisis

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A humiliating loss in parliament this week on its centrepiece Religious Discrimination Bill has intensified the unravelling of the Liberal-National Coalition government, amid mounting popular hostility towards it over the COVID-19 disaster.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government was forced to stall the bill after five Liberal MPs voted for a contrary amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act in the early hours of Thursday morning, just before 5 a.m.

With only a handful of parliamentary sitting days left before a looming federal election, the Coalition was desperate to push the bill through quickly in order to meet a pledge to religious fundamentalist organisations.

After a national plebiscite vote for same-sex marriage rights in 2017, the government promised to enshrine in law rights for religious groups to continue to discriminate against and vilify people, including because of their sexual identity, on the basis of religious "statements of belief."

This was to extend to key areas of civil society, including those that depend upon public funding, such as religious schools, in violation of core democratic rights, including the separation of church and state.

Having conducted a marathon all-night session to push the reactionary bill through the lower house—with the support of the opposition Labor Party—the government abruptly withdrew the legislation from the Senate within hours of its early morning defeat.

One of the main religious groups, the Australian Christian Lobby, demanded that the government halt the bill immediately after the Sex Discrimination Act amendment was passed with the support of the five Liberals, plus Labor, the Greens and some independents.

That amendment repealed section 38(3) of the Sex Discrimination Act, a provision inserted by the last Labor government in 2013 to allow church schools to discriminate against students on the grounds of their

sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationship status or pregnancy, "in accordance with the doctrines, tenets, beliefs or teachings of a particular religion or creed."

After the government's defeat on the amendment, the Christian Lobby declared: "The bills were intended to help faith-based schools but they now do more harm than good."

The government's swift adherence to the Lobby's instruction to drop the legislative package underscores the extent to which the Coalition rests on a religious fundamentalist base, which demands the right to discriminate on that basis, even in heavily government-subsidised church schools, in violation of basic democratic rights.

Equally, Labor's support for the Religious Discrimination Bill, like its 2013 provision in the Sex Discrimination Act and its backing for government funding of church schools, demonstrates its own reliance on a clerical base. While professing the need to protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender, Labor, like the Coalition, defends the right of religious bodies to discriminate, citing "statements of belief."

As soon as the government dropped the bill, opposition leader Anthony Albanese committed any Labor government to enacting a similar one, which would maintain "the right of religious schools to preference people of their faith in the selection of staff."

The chaos and extraordinary turmoil in parliament this week is part of a deeper political crisis, not just of the widely loathed Morrison government but the entire parliamentary establishment.

Thursday morning's mutiny by five supposed "moderate" inner-city MPs defied Morrison's Liberal Party room call on Tuesday for unity in the fractured party to avoid defeat at the federal election, which is due

by May.

It also came on top of reports that Morrison was rebuffed inside his own cabinet on Monday when he proposed to pursue a horse-trading deal with the “moderates” and independents for them to drop their Sex Discrimination Act amendment in return for a government promise to put to parliament legislation establishing a cosmetic anti-corruption commission.

News that Morrison was “rolled” in cabinet, despite telling his ministers he was putting his leadership on the line in a bid to secure passage of the religious discrimination bill, was leaked to *Australian* contributing editor Peter van Onselen and splashed across that Murdoch newspaper’s front page on Thursday.

Van Onselen included a direct quote from inside the meeting, writing: “‘This is going to cause more problems than it solves,’ one minister said in cabinet.” Another “cabinet minister” told van Onselen that Morrison looked “rattled” at being unable to carry the day in cabinet.

Clearly the leaks came from senior sources, indicating moves are being considered to replace Morrison. Over the past two weeks, similar top-level leaks have reported senior figures, including National Party leader Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce and an unnamed cabinet minister, denouncing Morrison as a “liar,” “psycho” and “fraud.”

Corporate media commentators are reporting, on the basis of discussions with anonymous Liberal MPs, that they are considering dumping Morrison, amid fears of electoral defeat. “I would say that, after this week, that is not an option that can be discounted,” one Liberal told David Crowe, the chief political correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.

The main contenders to replace Morrison are two equally right-wing figures—Defence Minister Peter Dutton and Treasurer Josh Frydenberg. Both have leapt to the fore in recent days, with Dutton in particular stoking an anti-China witch hunt, accusing China of backing the Labor Party, in line with the escalating US confrontation with China. Dutton narrowly lost to Morrison in Liberal party room balloting to replace Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in 2018.

Such leaks and reports indicate questioning in ruling circles that the fracturing Coalition government is capable of suppressing mounting working-class unrest over the pandemic and soaring inflation, and delivering the further economic restructuring and attacks on workers’ real wages and conditions demanded by the financial markets.

Recent media polls have shown a collapse in public

support for the government, largely because of the continuing COVID-19 catastrophe. There are thousands of infections in schools and rising deaths, especially in aged care facilities, as a direct result of the “live with the virus” policy to dismantle safety measures for the sake of corporate profit-making.

However, this “let it rip” offensive has been possible only with the bipartisan backing of Labor, which holds a majority in the “National Cabinet” of federal, state and territory government leaders that has presided over it. Federal Labor has provided Morrison’s government with “constructive” support throughout the pandemic, including on its massive handouts to big business, and the ratcheting up of the US-led conflict with Beijing.

The depth of the underlying political crisis is reflected in the fact that Labor’s poll ratings remain near the record lows of the 2019 federal election, when the already loathed Morrison government was able to cling to office despite losing votes. Labor’s support in the working class has collapsed after decades of enforcing, in partnership with the trade unions, the dictates of the corporate elite.

Since being installed as Labor leader after the 2019 debacle, Albanese has repeatedly pledged to work closely with the unions and business to impose a new wave of pro-market restructuring, deepening that imposed by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and the unions from 1983 to 1996.

As the government’s disintegration has worsened, Labor and the unions have done everything they can to prevent the anger of ordinary people, including teachers and nurses, from erupting into strikes and a political movement of the working class.

This week’s events in parliament show that the interests of working people find no voice in the political establishment as a whole. All are committed to the global profits-before-lives agenda, and US-led war preparations, while resorting to appeals to religious bigotry or identity politics to divert the rising class tensions.

What is required is a break from the Labor and the union straitjacket, and a turn to a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social need and guarantee basic democratic rights, not satisfy the profit requirements of a super-rich corporate elite.



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