

Revelations about secret ministerial posts show resort to dictatorial powers in Australia

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Recent days have begun to produce revelations in the corporate media and political establishment about the formation of the unconstitutional wartime-like “National Cabinet” in March 2020, followed by the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison secretly taking control of at least five key ministries.

Many questions remain unanswered about these revelations and the timing of their release, initially through the *Australian*, the national flagship of the Murdoch media.

What has emerged so far, however, reveals how quickly not just Morrison but the attorney-general, other cabinet members, senior officials in the state apparatus and the governor-general, as well as the state and territory leaders—mostly from the Labor Party—adopted sweeping and secretive authoritarian measures in response to mounting popular unrest as the global COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Above all, the fear in these ruling circles was the prospect of mass discontent, especially in the working class, over the refusal of governments to protect the population and to provide financial support for the millions of workers who were already starting to lose their livelihoods as the pandemic took hold internationally.

As infections and deaths throughout the world grew, including in Australia, two unprecedented sets of decisions were taken. The first, on March 13, 2020, was a joint proclamation by Morrison and all the state and territory government leaders of a previously unheard of “National Cabinet.” With all its workings shrouded in confidentiality and secrecy, this body is a form of de facto coalition rule by Labor and the Liberal-Nationals.

The second, initiated the next day, March 14, was for Morrison to be clandestinely handed by the governor-general direct control over the vast emergency powers available to other central ministers. On that day, while the public was kept deliberately in the dark, on the advice of the then Attorney-General Christian Porter, Morrison was appointed health minister alongside the officially sworn-in Health Minister Greg Hunt, giving him extraordinary powers under the Biosecurity Act. Two weeks later, as jobless workers joined long queues outside government Centrelink offices trying to access sub-poverty dole payments, Morrison was likewise appointed finance minister, giving him control over welfare payments.

Just over a year later, as the pandemic continued, and the even more deadly worldwide Delta wave loomed, Governor-General David Hurley secretly appointed Morrison to be the industry, science, energy and resources super-minister on April 15, 2021. That was followed three weeks later, on May 6, by the governor-general installing Morrison in both the treasury and home affairs cabinet posts, handing him direct control over all government finances and the major security and intelligence agencies—the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the Australian Border Force.

None of these appointments by Hurley was notified in any official record. The later three appointments that secretly centralised great powers in Morrison’s hands occurred in the wake of the January 6, 2021 coup attempt by then US President Donald Trump, with whom Morrison and leading figures in his government had close relations. Morrison refused to condemn Trump’s bid to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and instal himself as a dictator, backed by fascistic forces.

The virtual dictatorial powers secretly adopted by Morrison are unprecedented in the 220-year history of Australian capitalism. The fact this was the immediate response to the social, health and economic crisis produced by the pandemic highlights the profound putrefaction of bourgeois democracy in this country.

Yesterday, Morrison issued a statement via Facebook justifying his ministerial appointments. He disclosed something of the fear gripping the ruling class as demands grew from doctors, public health experts, teachers and other workers for urgent measures to contain the pandemic and protect lives and livelihoods as global financial markets and the world economy crashed.

Morrison wrote that his takeovers of ministerial powers were needed “to deal with the unexpected in what was a period of constant uncertainty during the nation’s biggest crisis outside of wartime.” He continued: [We] were dealing with everything from supply chain shocks to business closures, the overwhelming of the social security and hospital system and the sourcing of critical medical supplies and workforce. The prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic

collapse was real.”

Yesterday Prime Minister Anthony Albanese called a media conference, his second in two days, to accuse the former Morrison Liberal-National government of “an extraordinary and unprecedented trashing of our democracy.” But he sought to present this “trashing” as simply the product of Morrison as an individual, while rushing to whitewash the role of the governor-general, the Queen’s representative, whose own dictatorial “reserve” powers were invoked in 1975 to dismiss the Whitlam Labor government.

It is simply untenable to claim that Morrison would have, or could have, been installed in these multiple portfolios, centralising power over the crisis powers of government, without the consultation or knowledge of the heads of the state apparatus, including the military and intelligence chiefs, and the authorities in Australia’s crucial military partners in Washington and London.

Albanese himself was also working in the closest cooperation with Morrison and his government, offering bipartisan support for all the main measures it adopted throughout the pandemic, as were the state and territory Labor government heads in the “National Cabinet.”

Correspondence between Morrison, the governor-general, the US and Australian intelligence agencies and the Labor leadership should be immediately released to lay bare the truth behind these developments.

While voicing confected outrage over what he called Morrison’s creation of a “shadow government,” Albanese yesterday sought to minimise the issues involved, while reassuring the ruling class that he would try to repair the discrediting of the tattered and despised political establishment in the eyes of millions of working people.

“I’ll continue to run a good, orderly government that stands in stark contrast to the rabble and the chaos and the undermining of parliamentary democracy of our predecessors,” he declared.

But Albanese is just as committed as his predecessors to maintaining, and shielding in secrecy, the central institutions of rule, including the governor-general, the intelligence and military agencies and the “National Cabinet.” His Labor government is demanding “sacrifices” and “tough medicine” for working-class households in wages and government social spending, and escalating Australia’s commitment to Washington’s war preparations and provocations against China, which will require even deeper cuts to pay for massive military spending.

Significantly, Labor hailed and participated in the formation of the “National Cabinet,” which the Albanese government has retained as a mechanism of rule, behind the same wall of secrecy as that erected under the Morrison government. In fact, the Labor government has just rejected a Freedom of Information application for the release of the agenda for the first meeting of the National Cabinet under Labor.

An account contained in the just-published book, written by two Murdoch media journalists, Simon Benson and Geoff Chambers, shows that the so-called National Cabinet was created on March 13, 2020 to block moves, then being urgently demanded by doctors and recommended by public health officials, to introduce safety measures to stem the rapid spread of COVID-19 infections.

In the book, and elsewhere, Morrison has claimed that emergency powers were needed to protect the population from the pandemic, but the “insiders” account in *Plagued* demonstrates the opposite: Morrison and the state and territory leaders were determined to prevent any restrictions, even crowd limits, that would affect business profits.

On March 13, 2020, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), consisting of the federal and state chief health officers, recommended that all outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people be banned with immediate effect and proposed a 100-person limit on indoor gatherings. Several state chief health officers pushed for a shutdown of all events, indoors or outdoors.

According to *Plagued*, Morrison was fuming because the advice “would affect that weekend’s sport, pubs, cafes, the lot... On the spot, he [Morrison] made his call and proposed a national cabinet. This was met with unanimous support from the premiers and chief ministers.”

This account confirms the analysis made by the WSWs at the time. On March 17, 2020, we cited a “senior government source” who told the *Australian* that the formation of this body meant: “We are now effectively on a war footing.” The WSWs warned:

“The extraordinary measures are being officially justified as essential to shield the population from a catastrophe, but they establish precedents, and an atmosphere, for the wider imposition of such powers. Police powers are being bolstered, displayed and trialled amid rising anger over the indifferent and contemptuous government response to the pandemic, on top of the summer bushfire calamity.”

Despite what has been revealed, far more remains hidden. Splits and rifts have broken out in the Liberal and National parties, with Morrison defying calls by some of his colleagues to quit parliament. But the revelations are already a further warning of the lurch toward dictatorial forms of rule in Australia, no less than in the US, under conditions of rising war tensions, the ongoing pandemic disaster, the cost-of-living crisis and soaring levels of social inequality.



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