

Australian establishment in cover up mode over former PM's secret ministerial positions

Oscar Grenfell
19 August 2022

In the days since it was revealed that former Prime Minister Scott Morrison secretly appointed himself to five key ministerial portfolios in 2020 and 2021, the Australian political and media establishment has desperately sought to cover up the political significance of the measures, which amounted to nothing less than the preparations for a prime ministerial dictatorship.

The official press is almost universally presenting the ministerial scandal as an expression of the personal proclivities and psychology of Morrison as an individual. His ministerial self-appointments are being depicted as an unnecessary excess.

Morrison himself defiantly posted Facebook memes late last week, trying to make a joke out of the affair. Senior Labor politicians have trotted out glib one-liners about Morrison and his government being “incompetent” and “unable to do their job.”

The aim is to bury any discussion of the relationship between the ministerial appointments and a broader turn to authoritarian measures by the entire political establishment during the pandemic. This included the bipartisan proclamation of an extra-constitutional “National Cabinet,” in March 2020, to manage the pandemic response in secrecy and by decree.

Equally obscured is the connection between this dictatorial turn and the policies pursued by all of the country's governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, which are all part of the “National Cabinet.”

The anti-democratic forms went hand in hand with the pandemic response, based on bailing out the major banks and corporations, inflicting sweeping attacks on the jobs, conditions and social rights of the working class, and undermining public health at every turn, to ensure full profit-making activities continued.

The positions to which Morrison appointed himself comprised the key levers of state power. In March 2020, Morrison was made a second health and finance minister. This was when the federal government, and the state administrations were preoccupied with stymieing public health measures that would impact on profit, and ensuring the fortunes of the corporations and the ultra-wealthy, amid a major financial crisis.

Morrison assumed the sweeping powers under conditions of

major fears within the ruling elite of a social explosion, triggered by mass queues at unemployment offices and anger over official policies allowing the spread of the virus. As Morrison stated last week: “The prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse was real.”

The WSWS warned at the time that the anti-democratic measures used at the outset of the pandemic, provided a precedent for further attacks on civil liberties. In April 2021, Morrison appointed himself minister over the super-portfolio of industry, science, energy and resources. In May that year, he became a secret head of the Home Affairs ministry. Modelled on the US Department of Homeland and Security, it controls all the country's federal intelligence and policing agencies. The same month, Morrison became a secret Treasurer, jointly controlling all government spending.

A key component of the official cover-up is the assertion that Morrison acted alone, or close to it. Liberal MPs, who have never opposed a single attack on democratic rights, have claimed they were kept in the dark over the ministerial appointments.

But information continues to drip out, indicating that Morrison's appointments were a political conspiracy inevitably involving a wide array of co-conspirators.

The two senior Liberal MPs who are acknowledged to have known of the appointments from the outset, then Attorney-General Christian Porter and Health Minister Greg Hunt, facilitated them without objection.

Last week, former National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce admitted being aware in 2021 of Morrison's assumption of the resources portfolio. National Party MP and the then resources minister Keith Pitt admitted that Morrison had told him that he would take joint charge of the portfolio. Pitt said that either he or Morrison informed Michael McCormack, who was National Party leader in early 2021.

Governor-General David Hurley signed off on all the ministerial appointments. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, together with every senior political figure in the country, has rushed to defend Hurley, insisting that he was little more than an innocent bystander. Hurley claimed he was unaware Morrison would keep the appointments a secret,

despite no announcements ever being made.

The clear aim is to protect the governor-generalship, a linchpin position in the capitalist state, which, under the anti-democratic 1901 Constitution is the representative of the British Queen, as Australia's head of state. The governor-general wields vast powers, including to dismiss governments, as occurred in the 1975 Canberra Coup.

The cover-up of Hurley's role was undermined by an Australian Broadcasting Corporation report this morning, noting that the governor-general maintains a public diary online. It includes Hurley's meetings with government ministers, including phone calls and private discussions.

Ministerial appointments are listed for 2020 and 2021 but Morrison's accession to the five ministries is not mentioned anywhere. Those appointments are similarly covered up in the past two annual reports of the Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General, a supposedly independent government body, despite all other ministerial appointments being listed.

This morning, the *Australian* and the *Saturday Paper* both revealed that Morrison's assumption of the health portfolio was reported, at the time, to the national security committee of cabinet. That committee includes the government's top cabinet ministers, as well as the military and intelligence chiefs, blowing out of the water their claims of being kept in the dark.

The Murdoch media itself knew of Morrison's appointments all along, but kept them secret from the public until now. Morrison contemporaneously informed *Australian* political journalists Simon Benson and Geoff Chambers as they worked on the just-released book, entitled *Plagued*.

In other words, Morrison's moves, which amounted to a creeping internal coup, were an open secret throughout the political and media establishment.

Obvious questions arise. What discussions were held about Morrison's appointments with the British monarchy and the American intelligence agencies, both of which play the most active role in Australian politics? What was the role of Australian state and government agencies?

How is it that National Party leaders were aware of at least one of the appointments, but current Liberal Party leader and then Defence Minister Peter Dutton supposedly was not? If the appointments were being widely discussed in political and journalistic circles, how could Albanese and other Labor Party leaders not be aware?

All these issues are being buried, as are the broader political issues raised by the affair. A column this morning by the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly absurdly attributed these developments to an "ego trip" by Morrison as an individual, which had "undermined democratic principle, public trust and cabinet government."

Kelly continued: "Morrison engaged in an unprecedented, secret and unacceptable use of prime ministerial power that must not be repeated but an activity where no harm was done to any member of the public."

Whom does Kelly think he is kidding? Morrison, with the backing of sections of the government and the state apparatus, secretly assumed vast powers, laying the groundwork for dictatorial and emergency forms of rule. The extent to which these powers were used remains unknown, with the only evidence currently in the public arena consisting of Morrison's self-serving assertion that he used them once as resources minister.

While Morrison was secretly the finance minister, the government engineered one of the largest transfers of wealth to the corporate and financial elite in history. The health portfolio, which he also controlled, was a key lever, together with the bipartisan National Cabinet, in the rejection of a COVID elimination strategy and, in December 2021, the open adoption of "let it rip" policies that have claimed more than 11,000 lives this year and caused some nine million infections.

The fear of mass social opposition, which underlay Morrison's ministerial grab and the formation of the National Cabinet, is also the driving force behind the current coverup and the spate of articles, such as Kelly's, downplaying what has occurred. In today's column, Kelly accused Albanese of "political overkill" and warned that if he released the documents by which the governor-general installed Morrison into the five ministries, "this saga will likely take another, damaging twist."

There is real concern in the ruling class that any further exposure of the inner workings of the capitalist state apparatus, behind the fig leaf of parliamentary rule, will deepen the public disaffection and hostility shown in the May federal election, when the combined vote for the two main parties of capitalist rule—Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition—fell to an historic low.

This attempted cover up, encompassing Labor, the trade unions and the entire political establishment, is itself a warning to the working class. The ruling elite and all its political representatives are increasingly jettisoning democratic forms of rule amid an unprecedented global crisis of capitalism, the catastrophe of the pandemic, war and the mounting social and political struggles of the working class.



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