

The global significance of the resort to extra-parliamentary forms of rule in Australia

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Developments over the past week in Australia provide a warning to the working class internationally of the rapid turn to dictatorial forms of rule as the capitalist classes fear an explosion of social unrest and political discontent.

Behind the backs of the population, and the fig leaf of parliamentary rule, unprecedented decisions were taken that overturned the nostrums of accountability of the executive to elected representatives.

Much remains hidden, but so far, the revelations in the corporate media and political establishment have shown that from March 2020 the then Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison secretly took joint control of at least five key ministries, aggregating power over health, government finances, industry and the police and intelligence apparatus. In at least some cases, it appears, the responsible ministers were not aware of Morrison's moves.

Australia is routinely presented, falsely, in the corporate media as a stable parliamentary democracy. Moreover, its ruling elite occupies a linchpin position in the escalating US war preparations and provocations against China, claiming to stand for "democracy" against "autocracy."

What has been revealed, however, is just how quickly the political establishment resorted to extra-parliamentary and conspiratorial forms of rule, alarmed by the prospect of mass unrest, as soon as global COVID-19 pandemic first erupted.

Above all, the fear was of a movement in the working class against the refusal of governments to protect the population, as health systems buckled, and to provide financial support for the millions of workers who were already starting to lose their livelihoods as the pandemic took hold internationally.

Morrison was aided by Governor-General David Hurley, the representative of the British monarch who is the Australian head of state, and a former chief of the armed forces with close connections to the military and intelligence agencies, including those of the US and UK. Hurley covertly appointed Morrison to these crucial posts without any public record whatsoever, let alone an announcement being made.

This unprecedented action followed by one day the formation of an unconstitutional wartime-like "National Cabinet" with the state and territory government leaders, the majority from the Labor Party to form what was, in fact, a de facto coalition regime. At the same time, the federal parliament and its state and territory counterparts were effectively shut down for months.

Deliberately shielded by confidentiality, secrecy and immunity from Freedom of Information laws, the central role of this previously unheard-of National Cabinet was not to protect the population but the exact opposite—to block demands by doctors, teachers and other workers, and the advice of public health officers, for urgent safety

measures, including venue shutdowns and the closure of schools and unsafe workplaces.

From the outset, the preoccupation in the ruling class and its political servants—Labor and Liberal-National alike—was to mislead the public about the dire threat to health and lives, and prevent any restrictions that would affect business profits.

The overriding concern was to stifle and suppress opposition by workers and health professionals as the pandemic spread. As Morrison declared last week, when he belligerently defended his aggregation of power: "The prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse was real."

Similar fears existed, and still exist, throughout the ruling classes internationally as the pandemic continues unchecked, fuelling and intensifying the mass discontent produced by the food, fuel and cost-of-living crisis, ever-growing levels of social inequality, the disasters produced by climate change and the plunge toward a third world war involving nuclear weapons.

As Leon Trotsky warned in 1929, amid the rise of fascism, the switches and fuses of bourgeois democracy blow apart under "the violent pressure of class and international antagonisms." And as he wrote, then referring to Italian fascism, gout may start in the little finger or toe but it spreads, ultimately to the heart.

Today, the rot of bourgeois democracy is most acute in the US, the global heart of imperialism. That was demonstrated by then President Donald Trump's January 6, 2021 bid to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and seize power, backed by fascistic forces. Far from receding, that threat is continuing, aided by the feckless response of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

Around the world, similar developments are taking place as the façade of democracy proves incapable of containing the class and geo-strategic conflicts—from the collapse of the Johnson government in the UK, to installation of a repressive regime headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe in Sri Lanka, and the creeping return to martial law in the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

In Australia, the current Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the corporate media outlets are desperately trying to cover up the full extent of what has occurred and bury the far-reaching political implications, even while retaining the National Cabinet as a mechanism of rule, still shrouded in absolute secrecy.

They fear that any further exposure of the real inner-workings of the capitalist state 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 has produced a deep political crisis. Labor took office with the

electoral support of just a third of voters but is intent on continuing to impose the worsening profit-driven “let it rip” pandemic disaster, along with enforcing the greatest real wage cuts compared to soaring inflation since the 1930s Great Depression, slashing social spending, and intensifying preparations to join a US war against China.

Absurdly, Morrison’s actions are being attributed to an “ego trip” or megalomaniacal proclivities of the individual. But it is already known that he took control of the powerful ministries with the knowledge and agreement of key figures in the state apparatus, including the governor-general, attorney-general, the national security committee of cabinet, other ministers and senior officials. Rupert Murdoch and his empire knew because two *Australian* journalists were being informed all along by Morrison, about whom they were writing a book, called *Plagued*, praising his supposed achievements, which was not published until after the May election.

Labor leaders, working constantly with Morrison in the National Cabinet, must have known as well. Albanese himself also worked in the closest cooperation with Morrison and his government, offering bipartisan support for all the main measures it adopted throughout the pandemic.

Hurley’s part in this political crisis is particularly significant because as a former military chief, like his vice-regal predecessor Sir Peter Cosgrove, he had intimate connections throughout the military and intelligence apparatuses and their partners in the US and UK. Hurley’s central involvement, as the Queen’s representative, in Morrison’s accumulation of powers means that top figures throughout these networks, including in London and Washington, must have known of, and backed, these processes.

Morrison himself had very warm relations with Trump, with whom he identifies politically. Morrison pointedly refused to condemn Trump’s January 6 coup bid. But he also moved quickly to establish closer ties to the Biden White House. That was especially as Biden quickly ramped-up the conflict with China, along with Washington’s demands for the Australian government’s unconditional and frontline role in the aggressive drive to reassert the global hegemony of the US.

Morrison’s second wave of ministerial self-appointments came in April-May 2021 within that context of intensifying war plans under the new Biden administration against Russia and China in which Australia played a key, frontline role. Around this time, Biden convened the first leaders’ meeting of the anti-China Quad (the US, Japan, India and Australia) and held backroom discussions with Morrison and British Prime Minister Johnson on the AUKUS military alliance, openly targeting China, which was subsequently announced in September 2021.

Also knowing that the even-deadlier Delta wave of the pandemic was coming, shattering the National Cabinet’s first “economic reopening” offensive, Morrison took direct control over the Treasury and two super-portfolios—that of industry, science, energy and resources and that of home affairs, which commands the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the Australian Border Force.

The WSWS has already raised the demand for all correspondence between Morrison, the governor-general, the US and Australian intelligence agencies and the Labor leadership, as well as the still-secret documents of the National Cabinet, to be immediately released to lay bare the truth behind these developments.

Previous political crises in Australia have seen the façade of parliamentary democracy brushed aside, revealing the underlying weakness and fragility of Australian capitalism. On each occasion,

Washington’s fingerprints were all over the events, reflecting the dependence of the Australian ruling class on the support of the major imperialist power.

In 1975, the “reserve powers” of the governor-general under the 1901 colonial-era Constitution were deployed to dismiss Gough Whitlam’s Labor government after it failed to contain the strikes and struggles of the working class amid the global upsurge of 1968–75.

In 2010, as documents published by Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks later proved, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted, led by protected US sources in the Labor leadership, after he proposed an accommodation to the rise of China. Rudd was replaced by Julia Gillard and the unconditional alignment behind the Obama-Biden “pivot” to Asia to confront China.

In 2018, Morrison himself was installed as prime minister, and hailed by Trump, after a Liberal Party knifing of Malcolm Turnbull, whom Washington regarded as insufficiently reliable in the mounting offensive against China.

If Morrison did not openly use the powers he aggregated, except on one known occasion to refuse approval to a controversial offshore petroleum exploration project, it was because his government also called in the Labor and trade union leaders to suppress the resistance of workers to the deadly reopening of schools and factories and to the slashing of jobs, wages and conditions.

In May 2020, Morrison secretly invited Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus to Kirribilli House, the prime minister’s official Sydney residence, for private discussions on how to exploit the pandemic to restructure industrial relations. Workplace Relations Minister Christian Porter had already, the previous month, called McManus his “BFF” (best friend forever). She had told employers: “You can get everything you want through co-operation.”

These developments must be a warning of the developing lurch toward dictatorial forms of rule in Australia, no less than in the US and elsewhere—with the complicity of the Labor and union machines—under conditions of rising war tensions, the ongoing pandemic catastrophe, the cost-of-living crisis and soaring levels of social inequality.



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