

Australian Labor PM tries to smother outrage over Morrison's secret ministerial appointments

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Acutely aware of the widespread public hostility to what has been revealed, Australia's Labor government is going to extraordinary lengths to bury the vast political implications of last week's disclosures that Governor-General David Hurley secretly appointed then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison to five key ministries in 2020 and 2021.

The cover-up was underscored yesterday by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's release of a solicitor-general's "opinion" on the revelations, followed shortly afterward by the Labor government's speaker of the House of Representatives, Milton Dick, rejecting calls for Morrison to be even referred to a parliamentary privileges committee. Without any inquiry whatsoever being conducted, Dick declared there was not enough evidence to say Morrison deliberately misled parliament.

Supposedly, the solicitor-general's report was meant to examine Morrison's unprecedented installation in an array of the most powerful cabinet posts, giving him personal control over health, finance, the treasury and two super-ministries of home affairs, and industry, science, energy and resources.

But the result is a sham. Albanese instructed Solicitor-General Stephen Donaghue to cover only one of these appointments, not the power grab as a whole! Albanese asked Donaghue to answer the narrowest possible question: "Was Mr Morrison validly appointed to administer the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources on 15 April 2021?"

All the elephants in the room were entirely hidden. When and why did Morrison ask the governor-general to covertly start and continue making these appointments? When and how were these ministerial powers actually used? How extensive was the complicity of the political establishment, including the Labor leaders, in these secretive moves, which are now known to have been set in motion by the top-level, military and intelligence-linked National Security Committee (NSC) of cabinet?

Donaghue's resulting "opinion" insisted that the 2021 appointment was a perfectly constitutional and legal exercise of the governor-general's untrammelled authority, as the Queen's representative under the anti-democratic 1901 Constitution, to appoint ministers of the Crown.

That finding gives a green light for such authoritarian machinations to continue as governments, including the current Labor government, enforce an agenda of an unchecked COVID-19

disaster, deepening real wage cuts and social inequality and preparations to join a US war against China.

The report was drafted by the same solicitor-general whose own advice in March 2020 facilitated the mechanism that Morrison and the governor-general used to duplicate the five portfolios.

That 2020 advice is among the multitude of documents still being withheld from the public. An Australian Broadcasting Corporation article yesterday described it as a "three to four-page protocol" drafted for approval by the NSC, which comprised Morrison, Michael McCormack (Deputy PM), Greg Hunt (Health), Peter Dutton (Home Affairs), Mathias Cormann (Finance), Marise Payne (Foreign Affairs) and Linda Reynolds (Defence).

Before the eyes of millions of people, the revelations have begun to lay bare the political establishment's resort to extra-parliamentary and potentially dictatorial forms of rule, fearing social unrest amid the global COVID-19 disaster and the escalating US-led offensive against China.

This is compounding the collapse of support for the pro-business political establishment that was reflected in the May general election, in which the combined primary vote for the twin parties of capitalist rule—Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition—fell to an historic low.

Instructed and aided by the corporate media, Albanese's government is trying to shut down the furore over the revelations as quickly as possible and somehow instil public trust in the rotting figleaf of the parliamentary order. Its mission, as Albanese stated yesterday, is to "ensure there is absolute confidence in our political system going forward."

Today's editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian*—which covered up Morrison's power grab for two-and-a-half years—declared that because the solicitor-general had ruled Morrison's appointment to the resources portfolio was "legal and within the Constitution," the "outrage being projected towards a perceived fracture in the principles of Westminster government and breach of convention are of mainly academic interest."

Likewise, the *Australian Financial Review* political editor Phillip Coorey warned: "Albanese needs to be careful and not become obsessed with backing the truck over Morrison because, after all, he is in government now and faces monumental challenges."

In all the media coverage there is not the slightest mention of the other prong of the turn to extra-parliamentary rule in 2020 as the

pandemic erupted. That was the formation of an unconstitutional “National Cabinet”—a de facto coalition regime with the state and territory government leaders, mostly from the Labor Party. Albanese’s government has retained that bipartisan body, which is unaccountable to any parliament and shielded by confidentiality and secrecy provisions.

Nor is there any mention of the fact, documented in the book *Plagued*, that the National Cabinet was proclaimed by the Labor and Coalition leaders in order to block calls, including by health officials, doctors, teachers and other workers, for urgent restrictions to contain the pandemic—measures that would impact business profits.

For now, Albanese must put on a show of being concerned about the deception of the people under Morrison’s government. To attempt to channel the public alarm into safe waters, he foreshadowed another legal inquiry that would avoid the burning political questions. “It needs to be not a political inquiry but an inquiry with an eminent person with a legal background to consider all the implications,” he said.

Albanese rushed to dismiss any suggestion by journalists that the inquiry should examine the role of Governor-General Hurley, a former chief of the armed forces. Albanese declared that the report had cleared the governor-general of any blame.

As the Queen’s representative, the governor-general has potentially dictatorial powers under the 1901 Constitution in times of political crisis. These include the “reserve powers” that were deployed in 1975 to dismiss the Whitlam Labor government after it failed to contain an explosive upsurge in the working class.

Chillingly, the solicitor-general’s report upholds the constitutional mechanisms that allowed Morrison and Hurley to jointly centralise sweeping authoritarian powers in prime ministerial hands. It states that Hurley had the power, under section 64 of the Constitution, to appoint ministers, even if they were secretly duplicating the powers of other ministers!

The report also insists that Hurley had no discretion not to make the appointments at Morrison’s request, in contrast to “certain reserve powers that may be exercised without or contrary to” prime ministerial advice.

Nonetheless, the report points to further unanswered questions. It reveals that in August 2018, just four days after Morrison became prime minister, the official Ministry list given to parliament added a footnote saying that ministers also could be “sworn to administer other portfolios in which they are not listed.”

Morrison, who was politically close to the then-US President Donald Trump, was installed as prime minister via a Liberal Party room knifing of his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull, whom Washington regarded as insufficiently reliable as Trump’s administration ramped-up the US economic and military conflict with China.

This points to the connection between the turn to authoritarian rule, in both Washington and Canberra, amid the accelerating danger of a US-instigated war against China, in which Australia would play a frontline part.

By 2021, with the pandemic about to spiral out of control with the arrival of the Delta variant, further fuelling opposition to the profit-driven “economic reopening” offensive, the Ministry list

was deliberately false.

As Donaghue noted: “Morrison’s name did not appear in the Ministry list published in October 2021 with respect to any of the five departments that he was appointed to administer between March 2020 and May 2021.”

Despite exonerating Hurley, Donaghue’s “opinion” reveals that Hurley dropped “longstanding” practices by which the governor-general’s office instigated the announcement of ministerial appointments via government gazettes. The report provides no dates for when those practices ceased.

Evidently confident of legal and political protection, Morrison responded to the Labor government’s proposed further legal inquiry by ratcheting up his defiant defence of his actions. As in the US, where the Biden administration’s feckless reaction to Trump’s coup bid has emboldened Trump, a parallel political pattern is occurring.

Morrison asserted that the solicitor-general had ruled that all his appointments were valid and that he had not misused any of his aggregated powers. He doubled down on his belligerence, saying he was “proud” of his record in saving “tens of thousands of lives” and standing tall “in the face of extraordinary coercion”—a reference to China.

In reality, the bipartisan “let it rip” program spearheaded by the National Cabinet, which is being perpetuated under Albanese’s government, already has led to more than 13,000 COVID deaths. And Labor has stepped up the alignment behind Washington’s provocations and military preparations against China, escalated under Biden, while intensifying the Morrison government’s real wage-cutting and austerity measures.

This entire agenda is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. Increasingly, it requires repressive moves to suppress working class opposition. To defend its social and democratic rights, the working class faces the necessity for a struggle against the entire ruling establishment based on the fight for a genuinely democratic workers’ government and a socialist perspective.



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