

Why the Australian political and media establishment is burying Morrison's authoritarian power-grab

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It is less than a fortnight since it was publicly revealed that former Prime Minister Scott Morrison secretly appointed himself to five key ministerial portfolios, in an unprecedented power-grab arrogating vast, unchecked powers to the executive branch of government.

In the 121 years of Australian parliamentary democracy, no directly comparable action has been undertaken by a sitting prime minister. Under conditions of a turn to authoritarian forms of rule internationally, epitomised by Donald Trump's attempted coup in the United States, Morrison's appointments contain the unmistakable whiff of dictatorship.

And yet it has taken less than two weeks for the entire Australian political and media establishment to declare the issue more or less dead and buried. Coverage of the Morrison affair is well off the newspaper front pages and has slowed to a trickle.

The myriad unanswered questions are almost entirely ignored.

What was the relationship between the turn to extra-parliamentary forms of rule, and the policies enacted by the government?

Was there a relationship between Morrison's actions and global developments, including Australia's close ties to Britain and the US, and the prime minister's own affinity for Trump?

Was there an overarching plan to Morrison's assumption of sweeping powers, for instance, considerations of the declaration of an "emergency," the complete suspension of parliamentary democracy and rule by prime ministerial decree?

Many other questions could be added, but they are not being asked.

The first week after the ministerial appointments were made public was dominated by an official line depicting them as solely the result of Morrison's personal proclivities, and even psychological tendencies.

Since then, however, it has become crystal clear that Morrison was acting in concert with state agencies, and that his appointments were an open secret within the political establishment.

It was revealed on Monday, for instance, that Morrison's first secret portfolio, the health ministry, was handed to him by the National Security Committee of Cabinet, which included current Liberal Party leader Peter Dutton and National Party leader Michael McCormack. Most of the media has pretended not to see this information or have responded with a disinterested shrug of the shoulders.

The current Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has played the linchpin role in trying to dampen down public anger over the revelations and to move on to next business.

On Tuesday, Albanese publicly announced that Solicitor-General Stephen Donaghue had examined Morrison's appointments and found that they were not in breach of the Constitution.

The Labor government limited Donaghue's inquiry to only one of Morrison's ministerial appointments, that of the industry and resources portfolio.

This allowed the advice to simply ignore the fact that as a secret health minister, Morrison exercised powers under the Biosecurity Act, described as "God like" by his colleagues; that as a second home affairs minister, Morrison secretly exercised potential control over the country's main policing and intelligence agencies, and that as finance minister and treasurer, he had directly taken over the national finances, without any public knowledge.

Above all, this avoided any examination of the implications of a prime minister arrogating to himself the main powers of government, in what amounted to a creeping coup.

Albanese has announced a highly limited inquiry, which will be based upon the Solicitor-General's report. It will not be a Royal Commission, with the power to require evidence

and compel testimony. Meanwhile, he and his senior ministers have largely moved on to next business.

The consequence is that those implicated in Morrison's actions, including the former prime minister himself, are dominating what remains of public discussion on the issue. Morrison, in Trump-like fashion, has taken to social media to provocatively dismiss criticisms of his actions.

In his latest Facebook posting, Morrison declared that any inquiry would need to examine the actions of the states and the pandemic as a whole. That demand has also been taken up by the Murdoch media, which is now publishing daily screeds condemning the "witch hunt" of Morrison.

What they mean is that an inquiry would centre, not on the former prime minister's resort to quasi-dictatorial actions, but on the highly limited coronavirus safety measures that state administrations implemented at an earlier stage of the pandemic, falteringly and as a result of the demands of health experts and key sections of the working class.

The purpose of such an inquiry would be to condemn as authoritarian and dictatorial, in the manner of the anti-vaccine movement, any coordinated public health measures responding to COVID or future health emergencies.

There are several reasons why the political and media establishment, and the Labor government in particular, are so anxious to bury the issue of the ministerial appointments:

1. It has laid bare the sham character of parliamentary democracy. Behind the veneer of elections and parliamentary debates, political power is exercised by parties of big business that rule in the interests of the corporate and financial elite and are hostile to the democratic rights of ordinary people.

Coming amid unprecedented political disaffection in the population, there are fears that the Morrison revelations could blow the political establishment apart. The one true note in the official media commentary are the worried reflections of "political stability" and the future of parliamentary democracy.

2. The more the Morrison affair is discussed, the clearer it becomes that he was not acting alone. Already it is known that the leaderships of the Liberal and National parties were involved, together with the governor-general. There are strong indications that Labor at the very least held suspicions that Morrison was wielding ministerial powers.

Who else could be implicated and what would be the political consequences? What would be the political fall-out if it was shown that Albanese was aware of Morrison's actions, or the British monarchy or the American government?

3. Morrison's actions had nothing to do with protecting the population amid the COVID pandemic. He assumed the health ministry in March 2020, not to enact public health

measures, but to stymie their implementation.

The other prong was the creation, in the same month, of a bipartisan National Cabinet, that has ruled throughout the pandemic in secrecy and by decree. The National Cabinet, with a majority of its members from the Labor Party, presided over the homicidal adoption of an out-and-out "let it rip" program last December. The Morrison revelations demonstrate that this policy, prioritising the profits of big business over the health and lives of ordinary people, is incompatible with democratic norms.

Morrison's ministerial appointments are a warning to the working class of the turn to authoritarianism by the ruling elite. So too is the cover-up that is being orchestrated by the Labor government, with the assistance of the corporatised trade unions, the "liberal" punditry and other key levers of public opinion.

The response to the Morrison revelations demonstrates, in its own way, that the assault on democratic rights was not a product of the proclivities of the former prime minister.

There is no constituency for democratic rights within the ruling elite or any of its political instruments. The Labor government is pursuing full support for the US war preparations against China, a continuation of the criminal pandemic policies and a stepped-up offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of working people. Such a program, reflecting the interests of a tiny elite and the military-intelligence apparatus, is inimical to the interests of the majority, and thus to genuine democracy.

It is up to the working class to fight the turn to authoritarianism. Such a struggle must be fused with opposition to war, austerity and the official pandemic policy. It must be based on a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not private profit. That is the only way democratic rights can be defended, and true democracy introduced into every area of social and economic life.



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