

Australian Labor government continues to bury ex-PM's secret ministerial appointments

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Senate estimates hearings last week point to ongoing efforts by Australia's Labor government to whitewash and divert attention from the governor-general's secret appointments of then Prime Minister Scott Morrison to jointly take control of five powerful ministerial portfolios in 2020 and 2021.

Also buried were documents obtained via a recent Freedom of Information application that Morrison further aggregated unprecedented powers in his hands by establishing a furtive Cabinet Office Policy Committee, consisting only of himself, which met 739 times during the 45 months he was in office.

At the same time, the government's official inquiry by an ex-judge into the concentration of power in the prime minister's hands during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic is proceeding entirely behind closed doors. None of the submissions are to be released until after the report is handed to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which is due to take place on November 25.

Barely reported in the corporate media, last Friday's Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee hearings showed that the political and media establishment is going to great lengths to protect all those involved, including Governor-General David Hurley, the vice regal head of state.

Hidden entirely from public view until after the May election, Morrison's covert ministerial appointments of 2020 and 2021 revealed that the ruling elite rapidly resorted to extra-parliamentary forms of rule as the pandemic crisis erupted in March 2020.

Behind the backs of the population, Morrison was installed as a dual minister for health, finance, industry and resources, treasury and home affairs between March 2020 and May 2021. This centralised power over pandemic measures, government spending, industry and the federal police, intelligence and border force apparatus.

Once these facts belatedly emerged this August, Morrison defiantly declared that this had been essential because of "the prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse" in "the nation's biggest crisis outside of wartime."

It was a revealing admission of the fear gripping the capitalist class and its political servants of the eruption of working-class opposition to the demands of the corporate elite that schools and workplaces remain open, regardless of the danger of mass infection, hospitalisations and death.

At last week's hearings, Hurley's official secretary Paul Singer defended the governor-general's role in appointing Morrison to

administer the five departments.

Greens Senator David Shoebridge merely asked Singer why these ministerial appointments had not appeared in the governor-general's daily program, which is published on his official website. Singer bluntly declared that the program only listed "official engagements" and not "the contents of the governor-general's in-tray."

Singer insisted that "for many years" the announcement of such "administrative requirements" had been "the prerogative of the government of the day." He said this had occurred 38 times over the previous 10 years.

But that line of questioning evaded the real issues. Hurley did not install Morrison into ministries as an "administrative requirement." Morrison assumed power over five of the most important departments, evidently sometimes without the knowledge of the relevant minister, let alone parliament or the public.

There is no known precedent for such a clandestine arrogation of power, which violates the supposed Westminster parliamentary principle of ministerial accountability. Hurley, a former armed forces chief, was clearly complicit in that operation.

Shoebridge did not make that obvious point. Instead, he asked if Hurley had an obligation to clarify, inside a ministerial executive council meeting, whether multiple people held the same portfolio.

That question, which Singer insisted was "a hypothetical," triggered a move by the committee chair, Labor Senator Louise Pratt, to shut down the session. "I have to wind you up now, Senator Shoebridge," Pratt said, and the Greens senator readily agreed.

A mysterious one-man committee

In another session, Labor Senator Tony Sheldon asked about Morrison's one-person Cabinet Office Policy Committee, in which Morrison held secretive discussions with unknown people, also centralising power in his own hands.

This murky and still unexplained committee first came to light in a Senate estimates hearing in March 2020, but the then Labor opposition effectively joined the Coalition government in playing down its significance and burying the issue.

Documents obtained from a Freedom of Information application this September, however, showed that Morrison's "committee" met a staggering 739 times—an average of more than three times a week over 45 months. Yet Sheldon said the documents disclosed 266 meetings, a discrepancy that was not explained.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) officials continued to downplay the issue, saying it was not unusual for cabinet committees to “co-opt” other people to join them, regardless of whether they were ministers or even members of parliament. But again there is no known precedent for such a one-person committee, let alone one that met so frequently amid a political crisis. Morrison deliberately added a layer of secrecy to his closed-door discussions; defining it as a cabinet committee meant that the details of his discussions were immune from Freedom of Information requests.

Several questions about whom Morrison invited to these meetings were taken “on notice,” with the agreement of the estimates committee members. That left unanswered many crucial questions about the nature and outcomes of the meetings.

The estimates hearings also featured a bid by Labor leaders to divert attention from these many unanswered questions to alleged “leaks” by Morrison of cabinet discussions. The book, *Plagued*, by two Murdoch media journalists, that initially reported the first two of Morrison’s multiple ministries also contained boasts by him of declarations he made to the cabinet’s National Security Committee (NSC) about ratcheting up the confrontation with China.

Sheldon, supported by Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong, asked PMC officials whether Morrison had breached cabinet confidentiality by divulging NSC discussions as he collaborated with the journalists on their book during 2020 and 2021.

Plagued reported that, like Donald Trump, Morrison tried to blame Beijing for COVID-19. “Don’t doubt China’s capacity and will to exploit COVID-19,” he told the NSC—comprised of key ministers and military and intelligence chiefs—in April 2020. According to the book, Morrison told the NSC “the time had come to be more strident in its language about China’s conduct.”

Later that month, Morrison told the NSC, “acting as commander in chief,” that “Australia’s democracy was being ‘infiltrated’ and that it had to be resisted.” At another meeting he told the NSC that China posed “the biggest challenge in a generation.”

Sheldon, a former Transport Workers Union bureaucrat, had no disagreement whatsoever with Morrison’s anti-China diatribes. On the contrary, he essentially condemned Morrison for undermining the US-led escalation of the conflict with China. Sheldon said he had a “great deal of concern” about the apparent leak.

Sheldon praised PMC officials for referring this to the Attorney-General’s Department for an investigation into possible criminal offences committed by Morrison in divulging the NSC discussions to the journalists.

However, PMC first assistant secretary John Reid offered a defence for Morrison, along with other prime ministers, including Albanese. Reid said governments generally observed cabinet confidentiality, but “it is a matter for the prime minister of the day to decide that various information ought to be released.”

These further developments underscore the rot of parliamentary democracy. Labor’s official inquiry is also, as intended, keeping hidden the real extent and significance of what took place. It is conducting no public hearings, compelling no witnesses to appear and publishing no submissions made to it.

In announcing Bell’s inquiry, Albanese made plain its purpose,

declaring it was “important so that people can have confidence in our parliamentary democracy.” Any genuine inquiry, conducted by the working class, would draw the opposite conclusion: the need to have no confidence whatsoever in the fig leaf of parliament or any section of the ruling capitalist class to uphold fundamental democratic rights.

Notably, Albanese’s government is shielding Hurley for two reasons. Firstly, as a former military chief, he has close connections to the military and intelligence apparatuses and their partners in the US and UK. Key figures throughout these networks must have known of, and backed, the authoritarian measures undertaken by Morrison and Hurley.

Secondly, the governor-general, as the representative of the British Crown, wields potentially dictatorial powers for use in political crises, including to dismiss governments, as occurred in the 1975 Canberra Coup removal of the Whitlam Labor government after it failed to contain an explosive movement of the working class amid the global workers’ upsurge of 1968–75.

If Morrison did not openly exercise his extraordinary powers, it was because the Labor Party and the trade unions rushed to his government’s aid, enforcing the demands of employers and backing the multi-billion bailouts of big business. That line-up saw the formation of a de facto unelected bipartisan government, a “National Cabinet” of federal, state and territory leaders, mostly from the Labor Party.

The danger of dictatorial methods of rule to suppress working-class struggles is only mounting as the Labor government imposes further cuts in real wages and social spending in the face of soaring inflation, deepens the “let it rip” pandemic offensive and intensifies its involvement in Washington’s plans for war against China.



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