

Plagued: An “inside” look at Australia’s political crisis

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7 November 2022

Plagued, a book by two Murdoch media political journalists, purports to provide the “inside story” of Australia’s former Liberal-National Coalition government during the first two years of the COVID-19 disaster.

This account was withheld until after the May 21 federal election, which saw the Coalition government finally removed from office—much to the alarm of the authors—even though the Labor Party’s support also fell to a near record low. Labor took office with less than a third of the primary vote.

As the authors, Simon Benson and Geoff Chambers, lament, the election result pointed to a profound political crisis. Widespread discontent with the official deadly response to the pandemic, the imposition of austerity and the lurch toward war produced what they present as an unexpected electoral shock that rocked the two-party system.

In reality, this political order, upon which the ruling class has depended for more than a century, was already severely corroded after decades of intensifying corporate-driven attacks on working-class jobs and social and working conditions by successive governments, both Labor and Coalition.

Among the book’s delayed disclosures, hidden from the public for more than two years, was that the governor-general, the Queen’s representative, secretly appointed Prime Minister Scott Morrison in March 2020 to take joint control of the first two of what are now known to be five additional cabinet posts.

These five portfolios gave the prime minister a tight grip over health, finance, treasury, home affairs and industry. This included vast public health emergency powers, amid intensifying political turmoil and social unrest as the pandemic struck, repeatedly buckling under-funded public hospital systems.

The book sheds some light on the unprecedented centralisation of power as the ruling elite sought to suppress working-class demands for protection from the pandemic, as well as prepare for involvement in a US-led war against China.

Plagued shows that Morrison was not acting alone. In particular, he collaborated closely with the Labor leaders, especially Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, in the unconstitutional bipartisan “National Cabinet” established in March 2020. At the same time, Morrison called in Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus and other trade union officials to provide essential assistance.

If Morrison did not fully exercise the potentially dictatorial powers he aggregated, it was because the Labor and union leaders propped up his government and the capitalist order. For the sake of corporate profit, they pushed workers, including teachers, back into unsafe workplaces, often with reduced wages, and provided hundreds of billions of dollars in JobKeeper wage subsidies and other business bailout packages.

A “crushing defeat”

In its Prologue, the book begins with a glaring contradiction, for which it has no explanation. Largely based on self-serving interviews that Morrison gave them “contemporaneously” throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022, Benson and Chambers glorify their subject.

By their account, Morrison led a pandemic response that was among the “most impressive” in the world, prevented 40,000 deaths and made “one of the most significant defence decisions an Australian government has made in decades” by signing the AUKUS military pact with the US and UK, aimed directly against China. Morrison’s government delivered “unquestionable success.”

Yet, this view was “not shared by the electorate.” The voters inflicted a “crushing defeat” on the Liberal Party and Morrison. He had been the first prime minister to survive a full three-year term in office since 2007, when John Howard was so loathed that he lost his own seat in the landslide ousting of his Coalition government.

“A wave of discontent swept through the nation’s political architecture, shaking the foundations of the two-party system. Never had Australians so conclusively rejected both the major parties that, between them, had provided the country with an unprecedented period of postwar political stability.”

Despite the hostility and anger toward Morrison, however, the incoming Labor government received a vote of less than 33 percent. “Two in three voters had rejected Labor,” the book warns.

This concern by the authors, while full of contempt for the voters, reflects the anxiety in ruling circles about the growing fragility of the façade of parliamentary democracy behind which the capitalist class has maintained economic and political power.

The powers-that-be are acutely aware that the election outcome produced a near century-low vote for Labor, the party on which the ruling class has relied to suppress working-class opposition in every previous period of crisis, including both world wars.

Morrison worked with Labor and union leaders to block pandemic measures

Plagued shows that from the earliest days of the pandemic, Morrison and the state and territory government leaders, mostly from the Labor Party, sought to prevent, as much as possible, any COVID public health measures that would interfere with corporate profit-making.

The constant theme of the discussions related to the authors was how to keep the public in the dark about the real dangers of the pandemic. “Public messaging” was needed to “offer hope.” Morrison told his cabinet Expenditure Review Committee in late February 2020 that the pandemic, which was spreading internationally, could be “managed like a bad flu” and “we have to decatastrophise.”

On March 13, 2020, the government leaders declared themselves to be a “National Cabinet”—a de facto coalition regime bound by confidentiality provisions. On the same day, Treasury Secretary Steven Kennedy delivered them a presentation that conveyed a message that was “at stark odds with the health advice.”

Kennedy “didn’t mince his words.” He declared: “You start closing schools and you immediately take five million people out of the economy.”

From the outset, therefore, the “National Cabinet” was born out of a bipartisan drive to keep schools and workplaces open for the sake of profit, regardless of the health advice and mass infections of teachers, children and working-class households.

What the government leaders feared, however, was the eruption of working-class discontent as infections developed, over-stretched health systems broke down and workers were thrown out of work.

As Morrison stated this August, in retrospectively defending his covert assumption of a vast array of ministerial powers, he was preoccupied with “the prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse” in “the nation’s biggest crisis outside of wartime.”

Morrison was determined to stop any news of the National Cabinet’s calculations becoming known. He ordered all staff and advisers out of the room on March 13 as the leaders discussed how to delay official health recommendations for immediate bans on large gatherings. “He didn’t want anything about to be said in the room to be leaked,” according to Benson and Chambers.

All the government leaders agreed that Morrison should go to a football match that weekend, as planned, in order to maintain “public confidence.” Andrews said he should go. “Others concurred.” (Two days later, by which time recorded infections in Australia were climbing toward the first thousand, Morrison decided not to go to the match.)

That set the pattern of deceit that remained throughout Morrison’s government and is maintained today by the Labor government. Like Morrison, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has blocked all access to the documents of the “National Cabinet,” including its supposed health advice, as it continues to dismantle the few remaining COVID safety measures.

As the pandemic threat grew, Morrison, an openly right-wing figure, relied on a close political relationship with Andrews, a leader of Labor’s so-called “left” faction. Andrews initially opposed restrictions but later, facing demands from teachers and other workers, postured as a champion of suppressing the virus, and imposed a series of lockdowns.

On the eve of the proclamation of the “National Cabinet,” Andrews was the last to leave after a dinner that Morrison hosted for the state and territory leaders. “Morrison had a high regard for Andrews’ political skill and the two had built an agreeable relationship since Morrison had become PM,” Benson and Chambers write.

As Morrison and Andrews discussed the next day’s meeting, and agreed there was no need for restrictions that would affect business or sporting events, “the pair enjoyed a glass of whisky from a bottle of single-malt Tasmanian lark.”

Later, “Morrison and Andrews privately maintained a deep level of cooperation. In fact, they were in contact almost daily and often several times a day.”

As working-class unrest grew and long queues of jobless workers formed outside Centrelink welfare offices, Morrison’s government called in the trade unions to reopen workplaces and implement the JobKeeper program of wage subsidies. With the unions’ active support, JobKeeper became a mechanism for handing billions of dollars to employers while cutting workers’ wages and conditions.

In May, Morrison held an initially-secret meeting with ACTU chief McManus at Kirribilli House, the prime minister’s official Sydney residence, to discuss how to use the pandemic to restructure industrial

relations. They agreed to keep the meeting “private and low-key” because she “ran considerable political risk just being seen with Morrison.” He found her “polite and personable” and “constructive, pragmatic and straight.”

By this time, McManus had been working closely with Workplace Relations Minister Christian Porter, who described her as his “BFF” (best friend forever) for agreeing to slash workers’ pay and penalty rates during the pandemic.

“Morrison saw the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic as an opportunity for significant industrial relations reform... After a two-hour meeting Morrison and McManus agreed to approach the negotiations in good faith and see where it went from there.”

Ultimately, months of backroom talks between the government, employer groups and the union leaders failed to agree on a “reform” package, but it was not for want of trying by the unions.

Morrison also met with Australian Education Union officials and found them “cooperative” in the effort to stop the closure of schools, which would be a “near-fatal shot to the economy.” But he concluded that the union had “little sway” over the state unions—in reality, rank-and-file teachers.

At Morrison’s request, ex-ACTU secretary and former senior Labor minister Greg Combet, who had been working with Porter on “industrial relations reform,” was appointed to join business chiefs in the National Covid Commission, which was drawing up plans for economic reopening.

Ratcheting up the war drive against China

Plagued points to Morrison and his ministers seeking to take a frontline role in exploiting the pandemic to escalate the US-led conflict with China, first under Trump and then Biden.

In line with Trump, Morrison accused Beijing of responsibility for COVID-19. “Don’t doubt China’s capacity and will to exploit COVID-19,” he told a meeting of his cabinet National Security Committee (NSC)—comprised of key ministers and military and intelligence chiefs—in April 2020.

Later that month, “Morrison took a decision to up the ante with Beijing,” obviously in consultation with Washington. “Acting as commander in chief,” he told the NSC that “Australia’s democracy was being ‘infiltrated’ and that it had to be resisted.”

In May 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a stark message in an interview on the Murdoch media’s Sky News channel. The US would “disconnect” Australia from its intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes surveillance network if any Australian government made an agreement with China deemed to endanger US “national security.”

Morrison’s government heeded the message. He told the NSC, “there is no more serious issue facing the NSC” than the alleged China threat. It posed “the biggest challenge in a generation.” Legislation was soon passed, with Labor’s backing, to give the federal government powers to veto any agreement with China by a state or territory government.

Morrison wanted to assert control over the defence portfolio, as well as the others to which he was covertly appointed. The book describes a “deep dive” session of the NSC “with just him [Morrison] and the defence strategists present” about a possible “defence strategic update.”

Morrison, rather than Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, later announced the update, expanding military hardware spending to \$270 billion over ten years. “This would give him portfolio ownership of Defence,” the authors commented.

In July 2020, Morrison brought the National Cabinet into the war preparations against China. Ostensibly formed to deal with the pandemic,

this body became part of the war drive. The prime minister arranged a national security briefing for the National Cabinet on the alleged threat posed by China via “foreign interference” and cyber warfare. In a move said by Benson and Chambers to be “without precedent,” Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Mike Burgess delivered the briefing.

Under the Trump administration, Morrison was involved in discussions about reactivating and elevating to leaders-level meetings of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an anti-China front between the US, Japan, India and Australia. That plan came to fruition once Biden moved into the White House.

Morrison kept himself close to Trump, even appearing at one of Trump’s election rallies. He never denounced the January 6, 2021 bid by Trump and his fascistic supporters to overturn Biden’s election. Yet, according to the book, Morrison quickly welcomed Biden’s less “isolationist” focus on forging alliances against Russia and China.

By May 2021, Morrison was engaged in secret discussions with his UK counterpart Boris Johnson and the Biden administration on the AUKUS military alliance, which features the supply of nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles to Australia, designed for long-range use against China.

The AUKUS treaty, publicly unveiled in September 2021 with Labor’s backing, represents a sharp escalation of the US confrontation against China, and of Australian capitalism’s commitment to be a spearhead of that conflict.

Since taking office in May, the Labor government has further intensified this commitment, marked by Albanese’s trips to the Quad and NATO summits. He and Foreign Minister Penny Wong have undertaken missions throughout the Indo-Pacific region, underlining Labor’s role in reinforcing US and Australian imperialist interests against China.

Throughout its 347 pages, the Murdoch media’s *Plagued* defends the ruling elite’s lies, misinformation, resort to extra-parliamentary conspiracies and bipartisan collaboration—which are all continuing under Labor.

That is another warning of the readiness of the capitalist class and its media, political and trade union servants to combine deceit and propaganda with authoritarian forms of rule as they deepen the assault on public health, living standards and basic democratic rights, and escalate disastrous war plans.

In response, workers need to draw the necessary political conclusions. There has to be a break from the pro-business Labor and the union apparatuses, to unify workers’ struggles with those of their fellow workers internationally and a turn to a socialist program to completely reorganise society on the basis of human need, not corporate profit.



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