Australian government report covers up agenda behind ex-PM's secret ministries

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The Australian Labor government yesterday released its official report into the governor-general's secret and unprecedented appointment of former Prime Minister Scott Morrison to joint control over five extra ministries in 2020 and 2021.

As intended by the government's narrow terms of reference, the report by ex-High Court judge Virginia Bell is a whitewash. Above all, it explains nothing about the obvious question: why did Morrison and Governor-General David Hurley, with the knowledge of senior ministers and others throughout the ruling elite, resort to extra-parliamentary forms of rule as soon as the global COVID-19 pandemic erupted?

The report reveals that documents were prepared in 2021 to secretly install Morrison into a sixth extra portfolio, covering agriculture and the environment. That plan was apparently abandoned, but it would have given him control over no less than 7 of the 14 over-arching government departments, adding to those of the prime minister, health, finance, resources, treasury and home affairs.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the corporate media immediately echoed the report's implausible depiction of this extraordinary concentration of power in Morrison's hands as the result of Morrison's supposed individual megalomania.

In releasing Bell's report, Albanese quoted her assertions that the multiple ministerial appointments, all carefully hidden from the public, were just "exorbitant," "bizarre," "extremely irregular" and "unusual." That line was faithfully presented throughout the media, which is seeking to keep buried the real implications of the turn toward authoritarian forms of rule.

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.

Yet even the report itself shows that not just Morrison, but key ministers and senior officials were fully complicit in the appointments. As instructed by the Labor government, Bell conducted her inquiry entirely behind closed doors and required no one to testify, thus preventing any public examination of the evidence.

Nevertheless, passages from the report point to the atmosphere of fear of popular unrest that prevailed throughout the ruling circles as a whole. Bell reported: "Senior public servants and members of the Morrison Ministry with whom I spoke all described the singular pressure of responding to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. [Then deputy prime minister] Mr McCormack powerfully conveyed the gravity of the early pandemic briefings, the fears of widespread public panic and the sense, in March 2020, of being on a 'war footing.'"

These accounts are in line with Morrison's own defiant retrospective defence of his actions when the revelations were made public in August, when he declared: "The prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse was real."

In other words, the preoccupation in the ruling class was to mislead the public about the dire threat to health and lives, while preventing 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.

It is implausible to suggest that the US and UK governments with which Australia is in strategic military alliances would not have known about the extraordinary measures the prime minister was taking. That the leader of a country which houses the US intelligence station at Pine Gap and US military bases in the north of the country, would unilaterally seize control of central portfolios without prior discussion is highly improbable. The very fact that the governor-general, the British royal representative in Australia, signed off on the concentration of such powers points to the fact the monarchy and the UK government were also aware of the moves.

Similar concerns of unrest and instability exist throughout the ruling elites internationally as the pandemic continues unchecked, 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.

Morrison invokes "national security"

Yesterday, in response to the Bell report, Morrison doubled-down on his belligerence. In a Facebook post, he insisted that his installation into multiple portfolios was necessary because of a "significant challenge not seen since the Second World War and the Great Depression."

Morrison added what can only be regarded as a threat not to

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pursue the allegations against him any further. He declared that his awareness of "issues regarding national security and the national interest was broader than that known to individual Ministers and certainly to the Inquiry."

That message underscored one of Morrison's lawyer's letters to the inquiry (in which Morrison refused to be interviewed) that stated that "given the national security briefings received by the Prime Minister" it was "simply not available to the Inquiry to draw conclusions based on incomplete information." Bell described that letter as a "caution."

These vague references to "national security" point to the fact that Morrison was acting, not as an individual, but on the "briefings" he was being handed by the intelligence and military agencies.

Bell's report examines the Hurley-Morrison appointments in complete isolation from the accompanying developments of a secretive one-man cabinet committee, consisting only of Morrison himself, and the extra-constitutional "National Cabinet." Through this bipartisan wartime-style "National Cabinet," Morrison worked with the state and territory government leaders—mostly from the Labor Party—to limit public health measures and then scrap them, imposing a disastrous "let it rip" COVID regime from last December.

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

For all the Labor government's feigned outrage at the Morrison government's "culture of secrecy," it has retained that National Cabinet regime and kept it shielded from public scrutiny as it has dismantled what remained of health precautions.

The Bell report maintains that Morrison's appointments were "unnecessary" because it is perfectly legal for prime ministers to appoint themselves or other ministers as acting ministers to take control of departments "in a matter of minutes." Yet the report provides no explanation as to why these steps were taken.

Bell said the second round of Morrison's appointments in April–May 2021, to the resources, finance and the home affairs super-portfolio, which commands the domestic spy agency ASIO and federal police, had "little if any" connection to the pandemic, and the reasons for them were "obscure."

In reality, Morrison's government knew then that the even-deadlier Delta wave of the pandemic was coming, shattering the National Cabinet's first "economic reopening" offensive.

At this time too, the Biden administration was intensifying war plans against Russia and China, in which Australia plays a key, frontline role. 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 announced in September 2021.

Another glaring feature of the Bell report is its protection of the governor-general, who also declined to be interviewed by the inquiry. Bell insisted that criticism of Hurley was "unwarranted," supposedly because he was only following the instructions of the government of the day. Yet she reports that Morrison held one of his regular "breakfast meetings" with Hurley to discuss the resources appointment, indicating the intimate relations involved.

Albanese's government deliberately excluded the governor-general from the Bell inquiry's terms of reference. As a former military chief, Hurley 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 endorsed, the authoritarian measures undertaken by Morrison and Hurley.

The governor-general also 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.

Bell said the implications of Morrison's appointments were "limited" because he only exercised his extra powers once, to block an offshore mining project. But if Morrison did not openly use all his extraordinary powers, it was because the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucrats rushed to his government's aid. Union chiefs held backroom talks with Morrison and his Workplace Relations Minister Christian Porter, enforced the demands of employers and backed the multi-billion dollar bailouts of big business.

Bell made six recommendations, requiring public notice of the appointments of ministers. Albanese claimed that these recommendations would "ensure that the Australian public can have full confidence that this breach of trust will never happen again."

Albanese underscored the political purpose of the report's coverup, citing Bell's conclusion that Morrison's conduct was "apt to undermine public confidence in government" and was "corrosive of trust in government."

Yet the recommendations will not stop the lurch toward dictatorial forms of rule, nor are they meant to. For one thing, as Bell stated, such ministerial appointments can be made "in a matter of minutes"—long before any public notification.

The Labor government's inquiry aimed to present to the population the lie that democracy is intact and robust—that Morrison was a rogue element and an aberration. Behind the scenes however, preparations will be proceeding to ensure that the interests of capitalism are not threatened by the upsurge of the class struggle. This was, after all, the essential reason that Morrison cited for his actions.

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