

Australia: Corruption allegations against former NSW Premier Berejiklian were a political takedown

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The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) finally released its findings in relation to Gladys Berejiklian yesterday, more than a year and a half after its public declaration that she was under investigation compelled her to resign as premier of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state.

ICAC found that Berejiklian breached the ministerial code of conduct while in office. It effectively judged that she had acted corruptly. The commission, however, has not recommended criminal charges because it says there would be little prospect of a conviction. Berejiklian has rejected the finding and indicated she may appeal, either through ICAC's own mechanisms or a lawsuit.

The great and inexplicable delay in the release of the findings, it is now clear, was not because the commission was processing vast material that was incriminating to Berejiklian. Instead, what is most striking is the paucity of what ICAC has come up with.

Berejiklian's alleged conduct does not match up with what most people would imagine when the spectre of corruption is raised. There is no claim that she improperly used her office to obtain financial benefit in any way, or to advance her post-political career. Instead, the allegations, extraordinarily, centre on funding for cultural institutions in regional NSW, something that many in the often-deprived outer reaches of the state would appreciate.

The findings confirm what the WSWS wrote at the time of Berejiklian's October 2021 ouster and its aftermath. The corruption allegations were brought forward, as weak as they were, to effect a shift in official politics, further to the right.

Berejiklian was a conventional representative of the Liberal Party, the traditional outfit of the capitalist class. She governed in the interests of the ruling elite, including by undermining public health in the interests of profits during the first two years of the pandemic.

But at the very stage ICAC declared it was investigating Berejiklian, much more was being demanded. There were

concerns that on the eve of a national turn to "let it rip" COVID policies, Berejiklian was too closely identified with the previous approach, which had at least paid lip service to public health measures. And it appears that she was regarded as being too "wet" for the accompanying austerity agenda demanded by the ruling elite.

The accusations against Berejiklian hinge on her romantic relationship with Daryl Maguire. It began in 2015, when they were Liberal Party colleagues in parliament, and terminated sometime around 2018 when Maguire resigned amid allegations of improper dealings with property developers.

Berejiklian's weakness must have been known in political circles and to policing and intelligence agencies for years. It was tolerated, including for the twelve months after she publicly-revealed the relationship in October 2020, so long as she was viewed as a useful representative by the dominant sections of the corporate elite. With a turn in the situation, the relationship was weaponised.

Maguire, like many state parliamentarians, was involved in various dealings with property developers. He was also implicated in a dubious visa scheme. Maguire's shady activities, compared with previous grafts that have been revealed in NSW politics, were on a small scale. There is no allegation, moreover, that Berejiklian was even peripherally involved in his allegedly corrupt dealings.

Instead, the findings against her were over her failure to disclose her personal relationship with Maguire to cabinet colleagues, and two funding allocations made by her government. They were a \$5.5 million grant for the Australian Clay Target Association to develop a clubhouse and conference facility in Wagga Wagga, and a since scuttled plan to build a recital hall for the Riverina Conservatorium of Music.

As Berejiklian and her supporters have noted, both proposals were approved by the relevant Cabinet authorities, not simply by her personally.

To the extent that there were unstated political motivations behind the spends, they appear to have been Maguire's rather fanciful hopes to increase business investment in Wagga Wagga, and the government's concerns that the seat remain in Liberal Party hands. The latter practice, of directing government funds to shore-up control of an electorate, dubbed "pork-barrelling," is commonplace in official politics.

When it revealed its investigation of Berejiklian, ICAC and the corporate media also drew attention to a pledge she made to increase funding to Wagga Wagga Base Hospital by as much as \$170 million. It appears that issue has been dropped. Lynching a former premier for increasing funding to a public hospital, amid a major crisis of the health sector, may not have been the best look.

In any event, the timing reveals the political character of the move against Berejiklian. With her personal relationship with Maguire having been public knowledge for a year, ICAC only moved against her in October 2021.

The context was an escalating Delta wave of the coronavirus. Berejiklian, having resisted demands for public health measures in response to the surge, had eventually been compelled to institute lockdown measures. While containing a host of pro-business exemptions, and including discriminatory measures against workers and the poor, even these restrictions were viewed as an unacceptable impediment by the ruling elite.

ICAC's announcement that it was investigating Berejiklian was always going to compel her to resign.

The result was the installation of former Treasurer Dominic Perrottet as NSW premier. Perrottet, though little known to the public, had established credentials as the most determined free-marketeer in the government. Leaks made clear he had opposed public health measures that impinged on business through most of the pandemic.

Perrottet acceded to the office of premier just in time to preside over a "freedom day" marking the end of many safety measures, on October 10, 2021.

Over the following weeks, he would collaborate closely with Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison, to end virtually all health restrictions. That cleared the way for an Omicron tsunami at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, with tens of thousands of deaths after public health measures, imposed under public pressure, had limited illnesses and fatalities during the first two years of the pandemic.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper would later note the "serendipity" of a figure such as Perrottet coming to office just as the "let it rip" turn was being made.

Scandals are always a means of effecting such shifts within official politics, dominated as it is by intrigues,

corporate interests and the necessity to keep the population in the dark.

The operation against Berejiklian recalls the takedown of former Liberal Premier Barry O'Farrell in 2014. He was ousted for failing to declare his receipt of a single bottle of wine, to be replaced by Mike Baird, a figure with close ties to the financial sector, who immediately escalated the government's privatisation agenda.

The political character of scandals is also indicated by those that are not picked up. For instance, in February, it was revealed that Perrottet had worn a Nazi uniform to his own 21st birthday party in 2003. Perrottet claimed he had been completely ignorant of history at the time, despite already being involved in politics.

It would later emerge that Perrottet wore the uniform amid celebrations of advances made by the "Uglies" faction of the Liberals, with which he was associated. The "Uglies" had been founded, decades before, by Nazi war criminal Lyenko Urbanchich.

But after a few lame apologies, Perrottet was given a clean bill of political health, not only by the corporate media, but also by the then opposition Labor Party and its leader Chris Minns. The media did not raise the issue once during the March state election, nor did Minns.

The most prominent media outlets, including the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Murdoch-owned publications, endorsed Perrottet's candidacy on the basis of the pro-business pandemic policies he had enforced against the population.

That program is now being continued and deepened by the Minns Labor government, together with the federal Albanese Labor government and the other state and territory leaders, almost all Labor.

This just underscores the necessity for workers to take a critical and independent position in relation to official scandals. The issue is always to identify and expose the unstated political interests at work as part of the fight to develop the political consciousness and independence of the working class. More generally, workers confront a struggle, not just against this or that corrupt politician, but against capitalism, a social order that subordinates everything to private profit, and all of its defenders.



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