

Australian government to unveil new anti-democratic electoral laws

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On the pretext of limiting the power of corporate and wealthy interests to influence election outcomes, the Albanese Labor government is about to announce further legislation designed to shore up the fragile two-party parliamentary order in the face of growing social unrest and political disaffection.

The legislation, which has been drafted behind closed doors for months, has yet to be released or tabled in parliament. According to media reports, however, the government has begun briefing members of parliament on its contents.

Under the guise of placing limits on political donations and election spending, the legislation will erect onerous fundraising and bureaucratic hurdles for smaller parties, while boosting the multi-million dollar taxpayer funding of the main parties of the capitalist political establishment.

Yet-to-be specified caps will be placed on political donations by individuals, companies and non-party groups. They are likely to be high enough to permit large donations nationally, while expenditure limits will be imposed on campaigns in each individual electorate. That will undermine the ability of smaller parties and non-party groups to raise substantial funds to focus on contesting particular seats.

Extensive new financial reporting and compliance requirements will also make it more difficult for smaller parties and non-profit entities, including charities, to organise the resources, advanced technology, full-time staff and administrative capacities needed to stand or support candidates.

By contrast, the legislation will increase the public funding handed to incumbent parties, including to meet these “compliance burdens,” based on how many votes they secured in the previous election. Presently, that funding is calculated at \$2.78 per vote, but it is higher in most Australian states, ranging up to \$8.85 a vote in the Australian Capital Territory, which has a Labor-Greens coalition government.

This money, worth more than \$200 million for the 2022

federal election, flows to party headquarters to spend wherever they choose across the country. The amount by which this funding will increase has not been released.

At the same time, the rationale for the legislation is a charade. It will do nothing to curb the real power of the corporate conglomerates. They dominate and dictate the programs of all capitalist governments, regardless of their stripe, behind the figleaf of the increasingly discredited parliamentary set-up.

The Albanese government is cynically portraying the latest legislation as a move to block large donations from billionaires, such as iron ore magnate Clive Palmer, who officially gave \$117 million to his far-right United Australia Party during the 2022 election campaign. Palmer’s party conducted an advertising blitz that helped it pick up one Senate seat.

Another target is said to be the \$2.5 million donated by Atlassian founders Scott Farquhar and Mike Cannon-Brookes, and the \$1.85 million given by Rob Keldoulis, a share market trader, to the Climate 200 organisation, which champions the interests of “Green energy” companies. That money helped finance the campaigns of six “Teal independent” candidates who secured traditional Liberal Party seats in the House of Representatives in 2022.

These big money campaigns essentially represent conflicts between different factions of the corporate ruling class, while also seeking to channel disaffection back into the parliamentary order through the creation of “third parties” or groups of “independents.”

However, there are deep concerns in the ruling class that a fracturing of the political system could open the door for the broader discontent to find left-wing and socialist expression.

Most recently, an editorial in the Murdoch media’s *Australian* newspaper on the government’s narrow win in the March 2 Dunkley by-election pointed to this anxiety. “Extrapolating an anti-Labor swing of this size across the board at a general election would force the Prime Minister into minority government with the Greens, the teals or other independents. The potential for chaos would be

profound.”

Similar fears in the corridors of power were voiced in the June 2023 report by the joint standing parliamentary committee on electoral matters, which conducted an inquiry into the May 2022 election. That report’s recommendations laid the basis for Labor’s new legislation.

From its opening words, the report was preoccupied with propping up the parliamentary order in the face of “rising levels of public distrust [that] can serve to further alienate citizens.” It added that a divorce between “truth and trust” explained “why voters feel so disheartened and frustrated.”

The truth is that the entire parliamentary setup is distrusted because of decades of pro-business attacks by successive governments, both Labor and Coalition, on the working and social conditions of workers, producing ever-greater levels of social inequality, as well as the rising military spending and danger of war.

The Albanese government may try to push its legislation through in time for the next election, which must be called before May 2025. Special Minister of State Don Farrell is reportedly seeking support from the Coalition and the Greens to ensure a quick passage through the Senate.

These latest measures add a new dimension to the anti-democratic electoral laws that Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition jointly rushed through in 2021, just months before the last federal election. This is another desperate bid to bolster the two main parties of capitalist rule as they impose a deeply unpopular program of intensifying austerity and war preparations.

Like the 2021 legislation, the central purpose of the new measures is to stifle challenges to the existing parliamentary set-up, and particularly to prevent the mounting working-class discontent from developing a political voice.

In August 2021, for parties not then represented in parliament, the number of electoral members required to be officially registered and have their party names on election ballot papers was suddenly trebled from 500 to 1,500. This was in the middle of COVID-19 lockdowns that made physical political campaigning illegal, as well as unsafe.

Although the parliamentary report avoided saying so, the gap between “truth and trust” has widened enormously since the May 2022 election, when the Labor Party clawed its way back into office despite its primary vote falling to a near-record low of 32.5 percent. Labor only obtained a slim two-seat majority in the lower house because the Liberal Party’s vote fell even further.

Since then, Labor’s campaign slogan of “a better future” has proved a lie. Working-class living standards have fallen by the most in half a century, driven by soaring rents, home mortgage interest rates and prices. Labor has ramped-up its commitment to the US-NATO war against Russia in

Ukraine, the US war preparations against China via the AUKUS military pact, and remained in lockstep behind the Biden administration’s backing for the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

No one voted for any of this in 2022! Yet the widespread hostility and disgust toward Labor and the parliamentary establishment finds no expression within the existing order. Weeks of protests against the Gaza genocide have failed to shift the Albanese government one iota. Despite its cynical professions of concern about the humanitarian catastrophe, Labor’s support for the Zionist regime and its barbaric war continues.

The growing anti-war movement must be given a voice and transformed into a conscious offensive against the entire capitalist profit system, and the building of the only party, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), that will lead such a struggle.

This underscores the necessity of the campaign launched by the SEP throughout the working class to regain our official party registration. We must have the right to have the SEP’s name on ballot papers alongside our election candidates to give voters the basic right to express their support for a genuine socialist program.

We are actively seeking to sign up the total of 1,500 electoral members that we need to overturn our deregistration, which was ultimately imposed, despite our request for a six-week pandemic extension, in February 2022, just before the nomination processes for the May 2022 election.

We urge all our readers to apply to join the SEP as electoral members using the form below. This is essential to ensure that the SEP’s name appears on the ballot papers for the next federal election, as the only party fighting for the socialist alternative to capitalist barbarism, war, inequality and dictatorship.



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