

Australian Labor government appoints corporate leader to key post of governor-general

Mike Head
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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor government in Australia has emphasised its big-business character by installing a prominent female corporate figure as the next governor-general.

Samantha Mostyn, who will take office on July 1, is a highly political appointee. She combines military family connections from childhood with life-long service to the ruling class in high-profile posts throughout the legal, political and corporate establishment.

Her appointment was generally hailed by the corporate, media and political elite, including by Liberal-Nation opposition leader Peter Dutton and former prime ministers Malcolm Turnbull and Paul Keating. It was signed off, as required constitutionally, by Britain’s King Charles III.

Far from being purely ceremonial, this post is critical, especially in times of political crisis and war. Under Australia’s colonial-era 1901 Constitution, the governor-general is the commander-in-chief of the Australian Defence Force. The role includes constitutional powers for the appointment of the prime minister and government ministers, the power to suspend or dissolve parliament and “reserve powers” to dismiss the government.

By convention, these vast vice-regal powers, exercised as the representative of the British monarchy, are utilised on the advice of the prime minister of the day. But as shown by two previous constitutional crises, in 1941 and 1975, the governor-general can decide to remove or instal governments in situations of political instability or breakdown.

Mostyn typifies the revolving door between the Labor Party and the corporate elite. She served as a “communications” officer for a series of cabinet ministers, including Keating, in the dying days of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1990s. Over the following years, she was offered lucrative senior executive roles and board positions in some of the country’s biggest and most profitable corporations, including Optus, Virgin airline,

tollroad giant Transurban, Citibank Australia, insurance conglomerate IAG and property developer Mirvac.

On the back of her corporate rise, successive governments, both Labor and Coalition, appointed Mostyn to top-level government posts, such as the chair of the Albanese government’s Women’s Economic Opportunities Review and board member of its Climate Change Authority. She was previously the president of Chief Executive Women, a corporate-financed and government-backed body that aims to create “gender balance” in CEO and other top company executive positions.

Mostyn embodies the efforts of the government and the capitalist elite more broadly to put a “progressive” identity politics gloss—as a high-flying female executive and “equality activist”—on the bipartisan agenda of intensifying commitment to US militarism and the imposition of austerity measures on the working class.

Based on her involvement in corporate charity, philanthropic and sporting bodies, Mostyn is being depicted by the Labor government and the media as a “social justice” figure who can promote “national unity.” This is under conditions of accelerating US-led war moves and deepening political and social discontent, fuelled by the government’s support for the US-backed Israeli genocidal assault on Gaza—all of which Mostyn agrees with.

An editorial today in the Murdoch media’s *Australian* welcomed her appointment, saying her career in law, politics and business, “ensures an understanding of the way we are governed.” Nervously, it concluded: “Her challenge now is to inspire and unite us, to advance Australia fair.”

In her acceptance speech yesterday, standing alongside Albanese, Mostyn referred obliquely to the “large and complex” challenges facing the country. She declared that “the beauty of Australians is our ability to pull together, often despite our differences.”

Significantly, the *Australian Financial Review*, the voice of big business, today drew attention to the role that Mostyn

could play if the next federal election results, as opinion polls indicate, in a “parliamentary deadlock,” with neither Labor nor the Liberal-National Coalition able to form a majority government. The governor-general could have to decide who would try to form a minority government by striking deals with other parties and “independents.”

The newspaper’s editorial anxiously concluded: “The *Financial Review* hopes the deadlock scenario does not come to pass, but in any event, wishes the nation’s next governor-general the best in her new role.”

In an accompanying article, veteran senior writer Andrew Clark said the nearest historical comparison was 1941, when Robert Menzies’ World War II non-Labor coalition government lost the support of two conservative independent MPs. The then British governor-general of Australia, Brigadier General Alexander Gore Arkwright Hore-Ruthven, decided not to order an election. Instead, he appointed Labor Party leader John Curtin to form a minority government, which then made the strategic switch from Britain to the United States military alliance to conduct the war.

Clark further raised the spectre of Australia’s most recent “serious constitutional crisis” in 1975. Sir John Kerr, a Labor-appointed governor-general with Australian, US and UK military and intelligence connections, sacked the Gough Whitlam-led Labor government on November 11 that year. Whitlam’s government had proven incapable of containing an upsurge of workers’ struggles, as part of the global working-class eruptions of 1968 to 1975.

As governor-general, Mostyn will replace former army chief David Hurley, who was the latest of a number of military figures placed in the post. But Mostyn has her own armed forces connections. Her four-decade climb up the political and corporate ladder began as the child of an army colonel, described in the media as “high-flying,” who had postings in Vietnam, the US and Canada, as well as several Australian cities.

Mostyn has considerable experience in the legal and judicial establishment too. After graduating from the Australian National University with an arts/law degree, she was employed as a judge’s associate and then solicitor in prominent law firms, Freehills and Gilbert + Tobin, before becoming a Keating government staffer.

Along with other corporate figures, Mostyn was a visible champion of last October’s Voice referendum. That was the Albanese government’s previous bid to put an “inclusive” mask on its right-wing militarist agenda.

The Voice proposal sought to further elevate a privileged indigenous layer into the corridors of power, via a constitutionally-entrenched advisory body, and appeal for “national unity” on that basis. It was overwhelmingly

defeated in the working-class areas because of widespread disbelief that it would do anything to redress the shocking social conditions of most indigenous people in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis being imposed by the same Labor government.

Mostyn is an advocate of governments and employers collaborating closely with the trade union apparatuses to straitjacket and stifle working-class unrest. During the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, she publicly backed the partnership formed between the Morrison Liberal-National government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, led by secretary Sally McManus, to strip back workers’ wages and conditions while pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into corporate coffers.

Most recently, Mostyn was chair of one of the largest joint management-trade union superannuation funds, the \$160 billion Aware Super, which mainly covers health and other public sector workers.

Despite her Labor Party background, Mostyn has a record of bipartisan backing by the Liberal-National Coalition. Between 2013 and 2017, under the last Coalition government, she was president of the Australian Council for International Development.

Mostyn has many close connections throughout the ruling elite as a whole, having sat on the boards of numerous “clean energy,” arts and sporting bodies. That included the Global Business and Sustainable Development Commission, Creative Australia (formerly the Australia Council for the Arts), the Sydney Theatre Company and the Australian Football League, a major corporate entity.

In 2021, the *Australian Financial Review* declared her Australia’s “most influential” company director, based partly on her board positions at Transurban and Mirvac, which had a combined valuation of \$480 billion. In 2022, she featured on the newspaper’s “Covert Power List.”

Amid intensifying war moves, Mostyn’s appointment signals preparations for dealing with a developing political crisis. In one form or another, she is likely to be called up to exercise her vice-regal powers in the interests of propping up an increasingly discredited political establishment.



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