

Reactionary bills rammed through Australian parliament amid worsening economic and political turmoil

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29 November 2024

Using a procedural gag motion appropriately labelled as a “guillotine,” the Australian Labor government teamed up with the Greens and the Liberal-National Coalition to ram 31 repressive and other pro-business bills through parliament late on Thursday night and early Friday morning.

With an election looming by May, the final parliamentary session for 2024 was, first of all, another demonstration of the sham and decay of the parliamentary set-up. The guillotine vote in the Senate on Thursday to cut off proceedings meant that this avalanche of legislation was imposed on the population without even the semblance of debate.

Such is the disdain and disregard of the entire political elite for the millions of people whose lives will be severely affected by these bills, especially the teenagers who will be cut off social media, the working-class households facing a cost-of-living and housing crisis, and the 80,000 refugees and immigrants threatened by deportation.

An *Australian Financial Review* report gave a glimpse of how the legislative rush was driven by the dictates of big business. It described scenes of members of parliament scurrying through the parliament house corridors to consummate deals on Thursday, surrounded by “hordes of lobbyists and rent seekers” who “were running after their vested interests.”

The Greens, in particular, showed their true capitalist character. They struck deals with the Albanese government to rush through 27 of the bills, featuring tax cuts for mining companies and housing property developers, in an effort to shore up the increasingly discredited Labor regime.

That was despite the government simultaneously ditching an agreement with the Greens to pass token environmental protection laws, and Labor’s ongoing support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

At the same time, the openly right-wing Coalition, led by the widely reviled Peter Dutton, partnered with the government on the other four bills. Three of these provide for Donald Trump-style mass deportations and other anti-immigrant police-state measures, while the other inflicts a sweeping social media ban—that is political censorship—on teenagers up to the age of 16.

While Coalition leaders declared triumphantly that they were now running immigration policy, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese insisted that Labor was going further than the previous

Coalition government in slashing refugee and migrant numbers. “On Peter Dutton’s watch, there was a huge spike in the number of [refugee] protection visa applications onshore,” Albanese said.

As these boasts confirm, Labor and the Coalition are vying with each other to make “foreigners,” including temporary visa holders, asylum seekers and international students, scapegoats for the intensifying cuts to working-class living conditions, as are capitalist governments around the world, not least in the United States.

Aware of the outrage in Australia’s large immigrant population to the deportation measures, partly expressed in thousands of submissions opposing the immigration bills, the Greens postured as opponents of aspects of these measures. Nonetheless, they propped up the government with their own 27-bill pact.

The Greens acquiesced to Albanese’s last-minute reversal of a written agreement with Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek to pass legislation to establish a toothless Environment Protection Agency. Albanese intervened, at the behest of Western Australian Labor Premier Roger Cook, to protect the interests of the mining and fossil fuel industries, which constitute a substantial part of the Australian capitalist class.

Greens leader Adam Bandt admitted: “It’s pretty clear what happened this week—the logging and mining corporations told Labor not to protect the environment and forests, and Labor did what they were told.” But he refused to criticise Albanese for intervening to enforce that outcome.

This week’s deal-driven rush was not a record. In fact, it recalled the unsuccessful efforts of the Greens to rescue the last Labor government, that of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd, in the face of popular hostility to its pro-corporate, welfare-cutting and war-mongering alignment with the US Obama administration.

The 31 bills passed in the Senate at close to midnight on Thursday were the most in a single day since June 24, 2013, when the Greens helped Labor ram 52 bills through the Senate. After Labor’s near-defeat in the 2010 election, the Greens had formed a de facto coalition with the resulting minority Labor government, whose policies only laid the basis for the return to office of the hated Coalition, then led by Tony Abbott, by the end of 2013.

Today’s Greens are hoping for another power-sharing partnership if Labor can survive the looming election and cling to office, even as a fragile minority government in a hung parliament.

Interviewed by the *Guardian* yesterday, Bandt tried to justify the Greens' embrace of Labor's bill rush by holding out the illusion that his party could somehow change Labor's pro-corporate and pro-militarist course if they formed a de facto joint government.

"We've got what we can from this government, and so for us now, our focus turns to keeping Peter Dutton out and pushing on climate and housing in what may well be a minority parliament," the Greens leader said.

Albanese is also seeking to hold onto power by lining up deals with the Greens and several "crossbenchers" in parliament. On Thursday, he openly appealed to them in the House of Representatives for their support in the event of a hung parliament, just as he negotiated as parliamentary leader of government business under Gillard in 2010.

Albanese pleaded: "During the period 2007 to 2010, I engaged with all the crossbench and treated them with respect when we didn't need their vote. We then did need their vote after the 2010 election. I just believe in treating people in the parliament with respect."

It is not possible in this article to review the full content of the 31 bills "guillotined" through parliament on Thursday and Friday. But the following are the most notable features:

- A trio of migration bills (1) allowing the government to pay as yet unnamed third countries to take up to 80,000 deported non-citizens—removals that would rival Trump's plan in scale and brutality, (2) imposing prison sentences of up to five years for not "cooperating" with deportation and giving governments Trump-like powers to blacklist visa applications from designated countries, and (3) expanding powers to prohibit items, including phones, in immigration detention centres.

- Laws banning under-16s from having accounts on a number of social media platforms, including TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, X and the message board Reddit, cutting them off from vital sources of information and communication outside the misinformation pumped out by the corporate media.

- "Build to Rent" tax breaks to subsidise the construction of large apartment projects to rent, with only 10 percent of the dwellings required to be "affordable"—defined as 75 percent of the soaring market rates. That was on top of the "Help to Buy" scheme that the Greens backed earlier in the week, offering new homebuyers easier access to loans, in return for the government part-owning their homes—also fuelling the profits of developers.

- "Future Made in Australia" laws allowing governments to hand tax credits and other billion-dollar subsidies to companies to develop strategic critical mineral projects and related processing facilities, essentially to prepare for war against China.

In return for passing 27 bills, the Greens claimed credit for securing a few token concessions, such as a pitiful \$500 million extra in social housing electrification upgrades over four years—taking the total covered to only a quarter of social housing tenants—and excluding coal, oil and gas projects from investment funding under the Future Made In Australia program, which was already likely.

This deal-making rush occurred under deteriorating economic conditions globally and in Australia, even before the fascistic Trump administration takes office in January, threatening to

impose punitive tariffs on China and erstwhile allies as well, that could crash the world economy, in order to supposedly "Make America Great Again."

Inflation statistics released this week revealed that the underlying "trimmed mean" rate rose from 3.2 percent to 3.5 percent from September to October, once temporary electricity bill rebates were removed from the calculations. The Reserve Bank of Australia warned that it is now even less likely that it will start cutting crippling home mortgage interest rates until 2026 at the earliest.

According to another report, by Deloitte Access Economics, Australian government finances have already suffered their biggest ever reversal, outside that resulting from the onset of the COVID pandemic. It forecast the federal government deficit for this financial year would be \$33.5 billion, compared to last year's \$15.8 billion surplus based on high export commodity prices—a turnaround of almost \$50 billion in just 12 months.

Other Australian Bureau of Statistics reports showed that the greatest cut to living standards since the 1950s is continuing, with a sixth consecutive quarter of declining gross domestic product per head of population.

These developments are intensifying the demands of the financial and corporate ruling class for even deeper cuts to social services and working-class conditions.

Editorials today in the *Australian Financial Review* and the Murdoch media's *Australian* insisted that whether Labor or the Coalition headed the next government, it had to further slash government spending and drive up "productivity"—a euphemism for ramping up the rate of exploitation of workers' labour power.

The *Australian* proclaimed: "With the federal budget heading into deficit as tax receipts and mineral royalties fall after back-to-back surpluses, both sides must show an ability and determination to tackle government spending, including the structural deficit, and implement productivity reforms. A 'small target approach,' comfortable as that may feel for politicians of both major parties, will not cut it when the nation has reached such a serious economic crossroads."

This deepening offensive underscores the necessity for workers and youth to turn to a socialist perspective, against Labor, the Greens and the trade union apparatuses that police the wage- and condition-cutting dictates of the financial and corporate ruling class.



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