

Bipartisan electoral laws rammed through to prop up Australian political establishment

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Yet again, in what has become a deepening pattern, the Albanese Labor government teamed up with the Liberal-National Coalition last Thursday to push a far-reaching, anti-democratic bill through both houses of parliament in less than 12 hours.

This time it was electoral legislation designed to shore up the two main parties of capitalist rule, and erect greater obstacles in the way of smaller parties, while pretending that the changes will reduce the dominant political power of the corporate elite.

Once more making a mockery of parliamentary democracy, the Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill was rammed through without even giving MPs a chance to read its final details, let alone members of the public, after a last-minute backroom deal between Labor and the Coalition.

Ludicrously, despite the secretive negotiations involved, Special Minister of State Senator Don Farrell declared: “This is the most transparent electoral reforms that have ever occurred in this country.”

Farrell also claimed: “[T]he whole process pushes downward pressure on the cost of elections so ordinary Australians have a chance to be elected, not just those candidates who are supported by the billionaires and the millionaires.”

This is a sham. In fact, the legislation is more blatant in trying to protect the power of big business and its political servants than the first draft of the bill that the Labor government failed to ram through last November.

Although the legislation was passed too late to come into effect for the looming federal election, which must be held by May 17, it is another desperate attempt to prop up the two-party system in the face of intensifying popular discontent with the cost-of-living and housing crisis and the entire ruling class program of social spending cuts and alignment behind US militarism.

Not only does the legislation set cosmetic and easily evaded limits on election campaign donations and spending by wealthy donors. More fundamentally, it will do nothing to halt the reality of the growing dominance of billionaires and their corporations over the political system in Australia and globally.

The “electoral reform” legislation will have no impact on the oligarchs’ control of the economy and society’s productive forces, the real source of power from which they effectively

dictate the policies of any government. That is now nakedly on display in the United States under the fascistic rule of President Donald Trump and the oligarchs such as Elon Musk.

Even the formal donation limits are illusory. As a result of the deal with the Coalition, Labor’s initial proposed limit on individual donations to party branches that can be made without disclosure was raised from \$1,000 to \$5,000.

With Labor and the Coalition both having scores of federal, state and territory branches around Australia, donors can still give large amounts—for example \$45,000 to the nine state and federal branches of the Labor Party—without their names being made public.

The same applies to the overall donation cap of \$50,000, increased from \$20,000 in the November version. The main parties, including the Greens, have multiple branches, and they can take four donations per donor every three-year election cycle. That means a single person or company could give \$1.8 million to one of them, or any of them, in between federal elections.

An exemption for peak bodies means the Business Council of Australia, the Minerals Council of Australia, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and other lobby groups can give up to \$200,000, or four times the new donations cap, from affiliated unions or members to fund national campaigns.

At the same time, the legislation seeks to offset the declining public support, and donations, for the parliamentary parties by almost doubling their public funding from \$3.35 to \$5 a vote. By bipartisan agreement, they would become substantially state-funded entities.

One think tank, the Centre for Public Integrity, estimated that in the financial year leading up to the last federal election in 2022, political parties received \$67.8 million in public funding.

If they received the same level of votes in a post-2025 election as they did in 2022—and that is a big “if”—Labor and the Coalition will reap a combined \$140 million by some estimates.

That includes an estimated \$16.53 million in new administrative support funding for existing members of parliament to deal with the added burden of complying with new donation and spending disclosure provisions. House of Representatives members would receive \$30,000 each, and

senators would get \$15,000 each. Yet no such money would be available to other election candidates.

The legislation effectively bans charities and advocacy groups such as Climate 200 and GetUp! from using general donations on public communications about “electoral matters,” which includes commentary on issues like climate change, during an election campaign.

The legislation also imposes an \$800,000 spending cap on individual election candidates, whereas political parties have a \$90 million overall cap, which allows them to funnel resources into key seats.

In other words, the corporate-financed parliamentary parties, including the Greens, can avoid the \$800,000 limit per electorate by effectively targeting their national spending to specific electorates.

For example, a political party could spend on TV, newspaper and social media ads spruiking its leader and policies, but this would not count toward an \$800,000 electorate limit unless a local candidate was named.

In part, this \$800,000 limit is directed against alternative business-funded candidates, such as the “Teal” independents, who are supported by “green” renewable energy companies.

The cap is well below the \$2.1 million that Allegra Spender, a Climate 200-backed “Teal” candidate used to win the once blue-ribbon Liberal seat of Wentworth in Sydney’s affluent eastern suburbs. Other successful Teal candidates spent similar amounts.

More anti-democratically, the legislation imposes expensive and time-consuming requirements on non-parliamentary parties which do not have the funds and manpower of the corporate- or state-funded parties and entities.

A “real-time” disclosure regime will require parties to declare donations every month during a parliamentary term, down to every week during an election campaign and every day in the week before and after election day. That will impose an onerous burden on parties without parliamentary offices, staff and funding.

At the same time, lowering the individual donation disclosure threshold from \$16,300 to \$5,000, will result in parties having to publicly disclose the political alignment of ordinary people who give such amounts during the lead up to an election.

This legislation will not touch the wider media campaigns conducted by the major corporations and employers, whether it be to continue mining fossil fuels or keep decimating workers’ wages and conditions.

According to the *Australian Financial Review’s* 2024 Rich 200 List, the country has more than 150 billionaires, whose combined fortunes swelled by 11 percent in 12 months to over \$625 billion.

Together with their global counterparts, this capitalist class dominates the economic and political system, regardless of which party is in office.

This legislation is the second major attempt by the political

establishment in recent years to prevent any alternative perspective, particularly a socialist one, from being presented in federal elections.

In the lead-up to the 2022 election, anti-democratic legislation was rushed through parliament by the then Coalition government with Labor’s wholehearted support. Political parties were stripped of their official registration unless they handed over the names of at least 1,500 members, suddenly trebling the previous requirement of 500.

By contrast, parties with existing parliamentary representation were exempted from these requirements.

These laws also stripped voters of their democratic right to know for whom they were voting, because parties that fail the new test can only stand candidates without their party name on the ballot papers.

Since the Albanese Labor government barely scraped into office in May 2022, Labor’s primary vote, according to polls, has fallen dramatically further to less than 30 percent, primarily due to the cost-of-living crisis, Labor’s support for the genocide in Gaza and its commitment to US militarism, first under Biden and now Trump.

Yet there has been no real swing to the Coalition, raising the likelihood of an unstable minority government after the imminent election, producing a political crisis.

As on the electoral laws, Labor has increasingly formed a bipartisan front with the Coalition to ram through parliament reactionary legislation. Most recently, these laws have included huge tax handouts to mining operations, boosts for property developers, cuts to immigration and international students, and “hate speech” provisions designed to silence criticism of the US-Israeli barbarism in Palestine.

There is anxiety in ruling circles that the dissatisfaction in the working class with the bipartisan pro-business measures, commitment to US-led wars and cuts to wages and social programs will find conscious socialist expression, especially as this offensive intensifies to match that underway by the Trump administration. Hence the resort to ever-more anti-democratic measures.



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