

Despised ex-Australian PM awarded highest official honour

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Many people were shocked on Monday to hear that the country's highest official honour, Companion of the Order of Australia (AC), had been awarded to Scott Morrison, the Liberal-National Coalition's widely reviled ex-prime minister.

Statements of protest appeared on social media. Some 13,000 people have signed an online petition demanding that the Albanese Labor government rescind the award as an "insult."

In reality, Morrison's award could not be possible without the support of the Labor government and the political-military establishment as a whole.

The AC is the highest-ranking award in the annual King's Birthday honours list. The essential function of the list is to reward top politicians, along with big business leaders and military commanders, for their services to Australian imperialism, while expressing the establishment's gratitude for the work of selected others, predominantly scientists, academics, and arts and charity figures.

Formally, the King's honours decisions are made by the Council for the Order of Australia, whose members notably include the armed forces chief, a senior official in the prime ministers' department and a cabinet member, in this case Finance Minister Katy Gallagher.

Morrison was prime minister for three and a half years from 2018 to 2022, before his increasingly discredited government was thrown out of office at the May 2022 election. Above all, Morrison has been honoured for deepening the integration of successive Australian governments into the war plans of US imperialism, while assaulting the conditions of workers and welfare recipients, and laying the foundations for the current Labor government to intensify the agenda of the ruling class.

The citation for Morrison's award reads: "For eminent service to the people and Parliament of Australia, particularly as Prime Minister, to notable contributions to global engagement, to leadership of the national COVID-19 response, to economic initiatives, and to national security enhancements, especially through leadership of Australia's contribution to AUKUS."

The emphasis on the AUKUS military pact with the US and United Kingdom is most significant. By signing the AUKUS pact in 2021, Morrison took to a new level the commitment of Australian governments, Labor and Coalition alike, to

Washington's preparations for war against China, which successive US administrations have designated as the primary threat to American global hegemony.

This "global engagement" further deepened Canberra's alignment behind the war plans, particularly since the Gillard Labor government signed up to the Obama administration's military and strategic "pivot to Asia" in 2011, including the rotational basing of US Marines near the northern strategic city of Darwin.

The Albanese Labor government has intensified this commitment, turning Australia into a platform for a US war against China. As part of AUKUS, it has allocated at least \$368 billion to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, hypersonic missiles and other weaponry to attack China, agreed to greater US access to strategic military bases across Australia, and bullied Pacific Island states to line up behind the US.

In February 2022, Morrison was also one of the first government leaders internationally to pledge support and arms shipments to Ukraine in the US/NATO provoked war against Russia. This is another front in Washington's drive to reassert its dominance by subordinating both Russia and China. That move too has been expanded by the Albanese government, making Australia one of the largest non-NATO contributors, accompanied by Labor's support for the third major war front—the US-backed Israeli Gaza genocide and wider conflict in the Middle East.

The citation's reference to "leadership of the national COVID-19 response" is just as revealing. When COVID hit in 2020, Morrison and the state and territory leaders, mostly Labor, were initially forced by working-class concern to adopt basic public health measures, such as lockdowns, quarantining, tracking and tracing, and mask and vaccine mandates.

Over the next 18 months, Morrison worked intensively, especially with Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, to increasingly wind back these measures as soon as politically possible, overriding working-class opposition to push people back to work for the sake of corporate profit.

That dismantling of essential precautions was also completed by the Albanese government when it took office in May 2022. Whereas 2,239 people died from COVID in 2020 and 2021, that figure was exceeded sixfold in the first year of the Labor

government.

One of Morrison's main "economic initiatives" was to bail out the corporate and financial elite when the pandemic struck the Australian and global economy. In the guise of keeping workers employed, JobKeeper and other big business stimulus packages, together with Reserve Bank money-printing, resulted in the transfer of more than \$400 billion to corporations—about ten times the handouts they received during the 2008–09 global financial crisis.

Another "initiative" was the Robodebt scheme, launched by Morrison when he was social services minister. From 2015 to 2019, that automated regime sent welfare recipients an estimated 526,000 incorrect and threatening debt notices, unlawfully demanding repayments totalling nearly \$2 billion, causing trauma, financial suffering and, inevitably, suicides. Despite widespread public outrage finally ending the cruelty, a modified Robodebt-style offensive against welfare recipients continues under Labor.

Among Morrison's "national security enhancements" was to secretly swear himself into five additional ministries to the prime minister's—health, home affairs, resources, finance and treasury—giving himself vast potential police-state powers. That was in addition to ruling the country through an unconstitutional "national cabinet" with the state and territory government leaders, an institution that Labor has retained. The Albanese government organised a whitewash inquiry into the secret ministries that held no one responsible, including Morrison. Since its re-election this May, Labor has re-constituted the home affairs super-ministry, which includes the militarised border force, the federal police and the ASIO domestic intelligence apparatus.

As for Morrison's "eminent service to the people," Morrison remains notorious for ignoring the 2019–20 "Black Summer" bushfires in much of the Australian south east and flood disasters in early 2022. In 2020, fire fighters and victims refused to shake his hand once he belatedly visited one of the burnt-out areas. This experience became an exposure of the indifference of all capitalist governments to the growing climate change-related catastrophes confronting ordinary people. Under Albanese's government, there have been similar experiences in devastating floods.

Morrison's AC appointment has provided him with a platform to not only defend all his actions but to further call for greater military spending to confront China.

In one of his many media interviews, Morrison nominated the AUKUS agreement as one of his proudest achievements in office and praised the Labor government for continuing it. He told the *Australian* he "appreciated" how Labor had backed AUKUS.

Morrison said that this demonstrated to both sides of official politics in the US and Britain that "this is genuinely a national initiative." He added that there is no "real difference politically [between Labor and the Coalition] in our understanding of what

the threat is."

At the same time, Morrison called for a "new culture of urgency." He said the country must shift from what is "effectively a peacetime operation to a warlike preparation."

Morrison endorsed US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's demand for the Albanese government to lift military spending to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) "as soon as possible." Hegseth insisted that all governments in the Indo-Pacific region, like those in Europe, had to rapidly boost military spending to prepare for an "imminent" war with China.

In Australia, as elsewhere, that means further cutting public health, education, disability and other social programs, as well as workers' jobs and conditions, and this will fuel political discontent and working-class struggles.

Morrison remains well-connected. After finally quitting parliament in February 2024, he continued his service to US and Australian imperialism, including by taking up several appointments and consultancies, such as with American Global Strategies, a Trump-aligned corporate advisory firm, and AUKUS-linked DYNE Maritime.

Since the establishment of the Order of Australia in 1975, every ex-prime minister has, sooner or later, been appointed a Companion with bipartisan Labor-Coalition consent, except Paul Keating, who declined. That the Labor government simply agreed pro forma to honour Morrison underscores its complete commitment to deepening the program of war and austerity.

Labor won this year's election on the back of the further implosion of the Liberal vote. Morrison's successor as party leader, Peter Dutton, was widely associated with the Trump administration's fascistic "Make America Great Again" agenda, as was Morrison during Trump's first term in office.

Labor won the election with a substantial majority of parliamentary seats, due to the compulsory preferential system of voting, but it was a hollow victory. Its primary vote was barely a third of the total vote. The vote for the Liberal-National Coalition was even lower. A record number of people voted for third parties or independents, pointing to the widespread popular hostility to the reactionary agenda that has been imposed by both longstanding parties of capitalist rule.



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