

Australian PM unveils right-wing ministerial reshuffle as political disaffection intensifies

Mike Head
29 July 2024

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced a wider-than-predicted reshuffle of his entire ministry on Sunday, amid rising fears in ruling circles of mounting popular discontent, not just with the Labor government but the political establishment as a whole.

The rearrangement went far beyond Albanese's stated pretext of replacing outgoing Indigenous Australians Minister Linda Burney and Skills and Training Minister Brendan O'Connor. Both last week announced they would retire from politics at the next election, which the government must hold before May.

In fact, almost half the ministry was affected by the shake-up in one form or another. It was spearheaded by moves to further target refugees, international students, migrants and construction workers, making them scapegoats for the worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis.

This was underscored as soon as the new line-up was sworn into office on Monday. Having just been anointed as Home Affairs and Immigration Minister, Tony Burke flew straight to Bali for talks with Indonesia's Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Hadi Tjahjanto, on so-called people smuggling, counter-terrorism cooperation and transnational crime.

That signals an intensification of the militarised Operation Sovereign Borders to stop desperate asylum seekers—fleeing war, persecution and poverty—from reaching Australia.

Before departing for Indonesia, Burke said he took on his new portfolio “with a deep sense of responsibility and resolve.” He boasted that when he was previously the immigration minister in the 2013 Rudd Labor government, he cut the number of refugee boat arrivals by 90 percent. “The Albanese Labor government is committed to strong and secure borders,” he said.

This axis is in line with the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee witch-hunting measures being imposed by governments in the US, the UK, France, Germany and other imperialist centres. It serves to split the working class along national lines amid mounting war tensions.

Albanese, largely echoed by the corporate media, depicted

the reshuffle as a refresh. In reality, it marks a further right-wing turn to satisfy the demands of the financial elite for harsher cuts to social spending, and workers' jobs, wages and conditions, amid signs of a rapidly intensifying economic crisis.

Yet the government already confronts widespread working-class disaffection, particularly over the falling living conditions and Labor's support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Polling has continued to show imploding support for the government, which took office in May 2022 with only 32.5 percent of the primary vote. It is falling so far and fast that Labor could, at best, form an unstable minority government after the election, reliant on the support of the Greens and various independents. The widely-reviled Liberal-National Coalition could even return to power, heading an equally fragile regime.

A day after Albanese's reshuffle, Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV and radio host Patricia Karvelas drew attention to the latest results of a long-running Australian National University (ANU) survey, saying it showed “the depth of trouble his government increasingly finds itself in.”

In reality, the results show the depth of trouble that the entire political system is in.

The recently-released January 2024 survey reported that people had only a marginally higher level of confidence in the Albanese government than they did in the previous hated Morrison Coalition government in 2021?22—its last year before suffering a catastrophic collapse in its voting base.

Confidence in the government sharply declined from 51.2 percent in January 2023, when the media was still giving some credence to Labor's election slogan of a “better future,” to 38.5 percent in January 2024. That was just above the 35.6 percent recorded during the final month of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's decaying government.

Significantly, the results pointed to a yawning class divide. The most precipitous declines in confidence occurred in the working class, measured by the ANU study in terms of those with relatively low levels of education and those struggling

with their rents or mortgages.

Burke's installation in the immigration portfolio is part of a wider offensive by the government against refugees, immigrants and international students, seeking to divert the political unrest in a reactionary nationalist direction by blaming them for the social and housing crisis, primarily caused by the lack of public or affordable housing.

Under Burke's predecessor, Clare O'Neil, the government had already declared it would almost halve net overseas migration to 260,000 for 2024-25. That included slashing the number of international students, even though the chronically underfunded public universities rely heavily on the exorbitant fees they charge these students.

Despite widespread opposition in working-class refugee and immigrant communities, the government has reopened the barbaric refugee detention centre on the remote Pacific island of Nauru, transporting nearly 100 people there. It has also introduced a bill that could be used to forcibly deport up to 10,000 temporary visa holders or imprison people for refusing to sign documents facilitating their deportation and that of their children.

The bill would also allow the government to impose blanket travel bans, barring entry visas to people from designated "removal concern countries," such as Iran, China, Russia and South Sudan.

Earlier this year, Labor joined the Coalition in ramming through parliament laws to impose ankle bracelets, curfews and other police-state restrictions on detainees released by a High Court ruling, or to re-imprison them via "preventative detention" provisions.

Another immediate indicator of the government's thrust came when Murray Watt, Burke's replacement as workplace relations minister, gave an interview to the Murdoch media's *Australian* just hours after being sworn in.

Watt said his very first ministerial briefing focused on the punitive action to be taken by the government against the construction division of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU). This was a "big and urgent priority" for the government, he said. Watt declared that "we will take whatever action is required to stamp out illegal activity on work sites."

Under the pretext of cracking down on long-known trade union corruption, the move to impose anti-democratic government control over the CFMEU is part of an employer-government offensive to cut workers' pay and conditions in the building industry. This is driven by a sharp fall in housing and other construction activity and an explosion of insolvencies throughout the industry due to soaring costs.

At the same time, Albanese shifted O'Neil to become minister for housing and homelessness at a time when anger about housing is intensifying. O'Neil quickly vowed to

make her job about "delivery, delivery, delivery" on new houses.

Under the government's plans, that essentially means working with the state Labor governments to boost the prospects and profits of the corporate developers that dominate the housing market.

Several other aspects of the shake-up point to increasingly repressive measures to suppress opposition to the agenda of austerity and war.

Defence Industry and Pacific Minister Pat Conroy was elevated into the inner cabinet, underlining the massive expansion of military spending and the drive to restructure the economy to place it on a war footing.

The domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was brought under the same minister, Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus, as the Australian Federal Police, bolstering the police-state apparatus.

Albanese appointed three sub-ministerial "special envoys," the key one being Peter Khalil, as "special envoy for social cohesion." Khalil, who was a national security director in the 2003 US occupation of Iraq, has a prominent record of close support for US militarism's ruthless and violent global operations.

Under the banner of ensuring "social cohesion," Khalil's function will be to intensify the Labor government's efforts to denounce, slander and ban protests against the Gaza genocide.

Despite Albanese's shake-up, the ruling class is increasingly anxious about Labor's capacity, in partnership with the trade union bureaucrats, to contain and combat the intensifying discontent in the working class.

Labor's ever-more rightward lurch, in line with the developments in the US and Europe, could pave the way for a more openly far-right and authoritarian government under Coalition leader Peter Dutton, one of the most loathed figures in the political system. But that could trigger even more explosive struggles.

Monday's *Australian Financial Review* editorial on Albanese's manoeuvres concluded by declaring that whether the ministerial changes were "enough for Labor to avoid its seeming fate of entering minority government at the next election is the question now."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)