

New bipartisan electoral laws seek to shore up Australian political establishment

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On the fraudulent pretext of protecting the electoral system from control by “billionaires,” the Australian Labor government, backed by the Liberal-National Coalition, is seeking to rush through parliament a massive electoral bill within the next two weeks—the final parliamentary session for 2024.

Prepared for by months of behind-closed-doors negotiations between Labor and the Coalition, the legislation is yet another attempt to rescue the corporate political elite in the face of deepening popular disaffection with the entire ruling class program of austerity and war. It also imposes increasingly onerous imposts onto non-parliamentary parties which don’t have the funds and man power of the state-funded parties.

While the bill sets some formal limits on election campaign donations and spending, it would do nothing to halt the growing dominance of billionaire oligarchs and their corporations over the political system.

Not only could they evade limits by financing political campaigns via US-style funding outfits. It would have no impact on their control of the economy and the productive forces, the real source of power from which they effectively dictate the policies of any government.

Details of the 224-page bill were still to be publicly released on Monday morning, but enough is known from the Albanese government’s last-minute media release on Friday, and selective media leaks, to identify the desperate and anti-democratic character of the proposed complex web of laws.

One of the bill’s key provisions is to try to more than double the amount of public funding at a future election for the two parties that have formed governments in Australia since World War II.

If they received the same level of votes in a post-2025 election as they did at the last federal election in 2022—and that is a big “if”—Labor and the Coalition would reap a combined \$140 million. That would be three-quarters of the proposed \$90 million limit on each party’s election spending.

By bipartisan agreement, they would become substantially state-funded parties.

This would be achieved by increasing public funding of parties from \$3.35 to \$5 a vote from July 2026. By one calculation, the two parties could expect their combined windfall to increase by \$82.66 million to \$140.01million.

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 invasive 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 supposed centrepiece of the bill is spending caps of \$90 million for a federal political campaign, \$800,000 for an individual electorate, and separate caps for each state and territory based on their size.

Caps of that size would allegedly prevent campaigns on the scale of the more than \$120 million spent by mining magnate Clive Palmer’s United Australia Party in 2022. They would also curtail those of the six successful “teal” independents at the same election, who each spent more than \$1 million, largely courtesy of the “green” industry-backed Climate 200 group.

However, the existing corporate-financed parliamentary parties, including the Greens, could avoid the \$800,000 limit per electorate by effectively targeting their national spending to specific seats.

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

Groups not running in elections—“associated entities” like trade unions or third parties such as GetUp, a social media entity, and Advance Australia, a far-right lobby group—would be limited to spending \$11 million on a federal election campaign. They could also evade that cap by funding general political advertising.

Donations or gifts from an individual donor would be capped at \$20,000 a candidate for independents or per state division for political parties. Corporations or wealthy individuals could still donate an aggregate of 30 times the individual electorate gift cap—that is, \$600,000.

At the same time, the bill would lower the individual donation disclosure threshold from \$16,300 to \$1,000, resulting in the political alignment of many ordinary people being publicly disclosed.

A “real-time” disclosure regime would 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 would impose an onerous burden on parties without parliamentary offices, staff and funding.

In the government’s media release last Friday, Special Minister of State Don Farrell declared: “The Australian electoral system should not work on the basis that the only people who can be elected into parliament are people who are sponsored by billionaires.”

This is a sham. The country’s more than 150 billionaires headed the Australian Financial Review’s 2024 Rich 200 List. Those on the list controlled fortunes that swelled by 11 percent during 12 months to over \$625 billion.

Together with their global counterparts and the transnational corporations and investment funds they control, this class dominates the economic and political system under capitalism, regardless of

which party is in office.

At a brief press conference, Farrell, a life-long trade union bureaucrat turned MP, emphasised the bipartisan nature of the bill, supported by “in-principle” agreement with the Coalition.

Farrell made clear the Labor government intends to strengthen the two-party “Westminster system” inherited from Britain. He insisted it had served “Australia federally very well for the last 125 years.”

During that period, Labor and its trade union apparatuses have played the leading role in subjecting workers and youth to capitalist exploitation and suffering, including in two world wars, the 1930s Great Depression, the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and an historic cut in real wages over the past three years.

The bill will not even touch the surface of corporate political dominance. In the first place, donor caps can be sidestepped by funding through multiple entities, such as shell companies, limited partnerships and US-style political action committees (PACs).

In the recent US presidential election, more than \$US4.5 billion in spending came from “super PACs,” on top of the \$US1.6 billion officially raised by the Trump and Harris campaigns.

Nor do the proposed laws affect the wider media campaigns conducted by the major corporations and employers in their profiteering interests, whether it be to continue mining fossil fuels or keep decimating workers’ wages and conditions.

Another anti-democratic move

This bill is the second major such effort by the political establishment in recent years to shore up the existing set-up and 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 could demonstrate a membership of at least 1,500, suddenly trebling the previous requirement of 500.

Parties with existing parliamentary representation were exempted from these requirements. The others were given just three months to complete this task, during the COVID-19 pandemic which included lockdowns, making street campaigning irresponsible, reckless and, at times, illegal.

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

There was concern in ruling circles that the deep dissatisfaction among broad sections of the population with the bipartisan pro-business offensive, dismantling of COVID safety measures, commitment to US-led wars and cuts to wages and social programs would find conscious electoral expression.

This process has accelerated since the Albanese Labor government barely scraped into office in May 2022, with Labor’s primary vote falling to a near-record low of less than 33 percent. Young people, workers and professionals have been shocked and appalled by Labor’s strident and bloodthirsty support for the genocide in Gaza.

Labor has allocated hundreds of billions of dollars for the AUKUS military pact, transforming the continent into a staging ground for a

potential nuclear war against China, and backed the broader imperialist agenda, notably the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Working-class families are bearing the brunt of this cost through deep cuts to living standards, public health, education and basic social services.

This September, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) successfully completed a six-month campaign throughout the working class to win 1,500 new SEP electoral members and submitted the required application for official party registration to the Australian Electoral Commission.

The campaign revealed a growing constituency of workers and young people seeking a genuine socialist alternative to the capitalist programs of Labor, Liberal, and the Greens, which all defend Australian and international imperialism.

At the same time, the SEP explained that there was no national solution to the political and social crisis, and no parliamentary road to socialism. The fight to regain ballot status was part of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s broader fight for a unified global struggle against capitalism.

As the resolution adopted by the recent SEP national congress stated:

The entire parliamentary set-up has increasingly been reduced to a moth-eaten fig leaf, which has done nothing to oppose, much less obstruct, the whole gamut of war, budget austerity and authoritarianism. Parliament is increasingly exposed as a vehicle for enforcing and justifying the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. The critical issue is building an independent political movement of the working class, directed against the entire parliamentary framework. The perspective must be the establishment of a workers’ government—a government of, for, and by the workers. Such a government would abolish the repressive agencies of the capitalist state, place the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and encourage the transformation of economic and social life to meet the needs of the majority, not the profit interests of the financial elite.



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