

Australia's "national cabinet" declared permanent

By Oscar Grenfell
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Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced yesterday that the so-called national cabinet, established in response to the coronavirus pandemic, will become permanent, regardless of the progress of the public health crisis.

All the members of the cabinet, composed of the federal, state and territory government leaders, agreed with this major shift in the country's political order at their meeting yesterday.

Five of the eight leaders come from the Labor Party, which is in opposition to the Liberal-National Coalition at the federal level. They have been at the centre of a de facto national unity government since March, resting on the support of the corporatised trade unions and the federal Labor opposition.

This cabinet has no clear legal or constitutional status—there is no mention of such a body in the 1901 Constitution. Nevertheless, it has ruled by decree, via emergency powers.

The cabinet has been directly responsible for the criminally-negligent official response to the pandemic, the hundreds of billions of dollars provided by governments to big business and the woefully-inadequate assistance to the unemployed. It is now spearheading a campaign to force workers back into workplaces in the interests of corporate profit, despite the ongoing dangers to their health and lives.

Morrison said the national cabinet will meet fortnightly as the COVID-19 crisis continues, and once a month after that. It will replace the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which featured irregular gatherings of federal and state leaders.

The move is part of a broader coming together of the entire political establishment, directed against the working class. The purpose of such "national unity" arrangements, not seen outside wartime, is to suppress

widespread social and political opposition and to create the conditions for a further pro-business overhaul of the economy.

Through the national cabinet, the constituent governments have activated sweeping provisions in emergency and health legislation, including those allowing for expanded police and military operations. It will undoubtedly seek to maintain these measures, in line with a broader assault on basic democratic rights.

Unlike COAG, the cabinet's discussions are covered by confidentiality pacts, shielding its actual deliberations from the population. Morrison touted this as providing for "collective responsibility" and "cabinet solidarity" and prevent "political posturing." In other words, this secrecy is aimed at facilitating the seamless collaboration of the Labor and Liberal-National members of the cabinet, in the interests of big business.

Morrison said the national cabinet would "streamline" decision-making, allowing governments to impose major policies without "a whole bunch of paperwork" or "endless meetings."

The establishment media welcomed the move. Commentator Michelle Grattan wrote: "Scott Morrison strengthens his policy power, enshrining national cabinet and giving it 'laser-like' focus on jobs." An article in the *Australian Financial Review* declared: "COAG is dead. Long live the national cabinet."

Morrison signalled that the arrangement will be critical to "tax reform," i.e., lowering tax rates for the major corporations and reducing public spending. This is part of a further profit-driven restructuring.

Earlier this month, with the support of all his cabinet colleagues, Morrison outlined a plan to "streamline" tertiary education funding. The state governments will oversee a "simplification" of the TAFE technical

college model, reducing the number of courses and gearing them even more directly to the employment needs of big business.

Morrison said the national cabinet's central mission will be "job creation." In reality, working with employers and the unions, it has already overseen the destruction of more than a million jobs in the past three months.

The endless invocation of "creating jobs" is aimed at legitimising a far-reaching assault on wages and working conditions.

Governments, the unions and employers' groups are insisting that workers accept the permanent imposition of changes introduced during the pandemic, including the slashing of penalty rates and shift restrictions across entire industries. With the Australian Council of Trade Unions in the lead, they are preparing a tripartite reshaping of industrial relations, aimed at removing any obstacles to a continuous assault on wages and conditions.

To create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making, the national cabinet is accelerating a dangerous "back to work" campaign, aimed at forcing employees back into all work sites, including schools, factories, offices and universities.

In recent days, face-to-face teaching has been resumed in public schools in New South Wales (NSW) Victoria and Queensland, despite widespread opposition from education workers and parents. Within days of the reopening, two schools in Sydney and one in Melbourne were forced to close last week, as a result of COVID-19 cases among students.

The national cabinet meeting agreed yesterday that it had completed "stage one" of a three-stage removal of lockdown measures. This has included the abolition of numbers of restrictions on gatherings and intrastate travel, as well as the resumption of classroom teaching.

Without even waiting to assess the results, states are going beyond "stage one" already. The NSW government, for instance, is allowing clubs to have 500 people on their premises from next Monday. Such measures render contact tracing, in the event of viral outbreaks, virtually impossible.

The federal government Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy admitted it was not yet possible to determine the health consequences of stage one. In other words, the authorities do not know how widely

the coronavirus is circulating.

Morrison restated that there would be "spikes" and "outbreaks." He again declared that the policy is not to "eradicate or eliminate" COVID-19 transmissions, because he insisted this would be too costly.

The dangers have been underscored by continuing infections, including 12 across the country over the past 24 hours. The possibility of unknown community transmission was highlighted last week by the tragic death of 30-year-old miner Nathan Turner in the regional Queensland town of Blackwater.

After he died, it was determined that he had the coronavirus. The miner had not come into contact with any confirmed cases or recently travelled outside the town. It was previously thought there were no cases in that region.

Investigations are continuing, but one possibility is that Turner contracted COVID-19 from fly-in fly-out miners or contractors. Throughout the pandemic, the multi-billion dollar mining industry has been exempted from key restrictions. Employees have continued to travel to remote and regional sites from major cities, despite the obvious danger of further outbreaks.

An article in the *Melbourne Age* this morning further pointed to the ruthless role of business in the health crisis. It revealed that workers at Cedar Meats, a Melbourne abattoir that has been the source of over 100 infections, warned management in mid-April that they thought COVID-19 was circulating in the facility. Their concerns were dismissed as "rumour and innuendo." They were forced to remain on the job, resulting in the largest virus cluster in the state of Victoria.

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