

Labor supports new attack on small parties' rights

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AUSTRALIA'S ALREADY unrepresentative electoral system is about to become even less democratic.

Labor joined forces with the Coalition on August 24 to support much of its package of four bills in the Electoral Legislation Amendment (Party Registration Integrity) Bill aimed at further entrenching the parliamentary dominance of the major parties.

A significant change is that parties without any MPs must submit 1500 names to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to become, or remain, registered. Until now, parties could register with 500 names.

The current settings already advantage the big parties and the change will tip the balance even further. Any MP can register a political party without demonstrating any community support. For example, when Cory Bernardi split from the Liberals in 2017 he effortlessly registered the Australian Conservatives, despite being elected on a Liberal Senate ticket (that is, without any personal endorsement by voters).

Meanwhile, small parties without federal MPs but with elected councillors — such as the Socialist Alliance, which registered in 2007 and has contested every federal election since then — are being forced to go through the onerous process of demonstrating continued compliance.

The registration process is less of a barrier for small right-wing start ups — such as the Palmer



Socialist Alliance councillors Rob Pyne (Cairns, Queensland), Sam Wainwright (Fremantle, Western Australia) and Sue Bolton (Moreland, Victoria).

United Party — because they have greater access to funding to employ organisers to smooth the way.

Another significant change to the law is that parties will be restricted from using words like “liberal” and “labor” in their names.

word ‘liberal’ has a broad meaning and history; it is suggestive of a certain political philosophy.

“It is not a word that is only associated with one particular party.”

The same applies to “labor” and “green”.

“party” and “Australia”.

So far, it is unclear what the determination will be on “socialist”. Currently, there are three registered parties with “socialist” in their names, the Socialist Alliance being the oldest.

Greens Senator Larissa Waters said the combined impact of the bills is that “dozens of minor parties are now at risk of being deregistered”.

“It’s an attack on our democracy at a time when neither the Libs nor Labor can be trusted to act in the interests of anyone else other than their corporate donors.”

Socialist Alliance national co-convenor and Fremantle councillor Sam Wainwright told *Green Left* that the new law is an attack on small parties. “We should be moving in the opposite direction to expand rather than attack democratic rights.”

He said a simple way to move that way would be to bring in proportional representation.

“Another way would be to make sure that information is provided to all voters about all of the parties running so people can make informed judgments about who to vote for,” he said.

“There is a long-term relatively steady trend of increasing votes going away from the major parties because neither Labor nor Liberal really represent ordinary people’s interests.”

Other changes include a restriction on early voting to two weeks (down from three).

Labor also supported measures, ostensibly to prevent “multiple voting”, that have not been adequately justified. The suggestion of “multiple voting” is reminiscent of the Trumpian electoral conspiracy theories common on the United States far right, which have so far had negligible resonance here.

Labor did not support the attack on non-profit organisations that aimed to lower the expenditure threshold to register as a political campaigner from \$500,000 to \$100,000.

Waters described this as “saddling civil society organisations with significant financial and disclosure burdens”, making it “harder to engage in public debate”. She said it was in the interest of “public interest advocacy” to oppose the change.

In the end, the government did not push this fourth bill to a vote. This suggests that Labor’s support was critical for the passage of the other three. ■

The new laws give the establishment parties the power to force others to change their name or lose registration.

Currently, the “New Liberals”, the “Liberal Democrats” and the “Democratic Labour Party” are registered political parties. Previously, the “Progressive Labor Party” and the “Liberals for Forests” were registered.

Joanne Reid from the AEC explained in June that “the

The new laws give the establishment parties the power to force others, such as the New Liberals, to change their name or lose registration. Ben Morton, assistant minister for electoral matters, told the Guardian that “common sense exceptions” would apply to words such as “alliance”,