

Racist party dominates Australian election

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Regardless of whichever party wins the election in the northern Australian state of Queensland, to be held this Saturday, the election campaign itself has revealed the collapse of support for the major capitalist parties -- Liberal, Labor and Nationals.

The National Party, which at present forms the Queensland government in coalition with the Liberals, is polling as low as 9 percent in its former rural heartland, while the Liberal Party vote has plummeted in the urban areas of Brisbane, the state capital.

But the opposition Labor Party has not benefitted. Its support remains at around 38 percent -- the historic low it registered in 1993.

Almost from the outset, the campaign has been dominated by the right-wing populist, anti-immigrant and racist One Nation party led by a federal MP, Pauline Hanson. According to opinion polls, support for the Hanson group is running at 18 percent and the party could win as many as four seats in the 89-member state parliament.

If One Nation were to receive similar support on a national scale, the Liberal-National Party coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, despite enjoying a huge parliamentary majority, could lose a number of seats, or even face defeat at the federal elections due to be held within the next few months.

In Queensland, the Liberal and National parties have been openly courting Hanson's supporters, officially deciding to extend their second voting preferences to One Nation candidates. This may be crucial to the outcome of the election because under the preferential ballot system, votes cast for one candidate can be passed onto another if the first candidate fails to win.

The shift to the right in the whole spectrum of bourgeois politics is expressed most sharply in the fact that Queensland's National Party Premier Robert Borbidge has declared his willingness to form a minority government after the election, with One Nation's support.

One Nation has reciprocated, giving its voting preferences to Liberal and National candidates and promising to ensure "stable government" in the state, should the coalition be returned.

This has provoked sharp tensions within the National and Liberal parties.

A former president of the Queensland Liberals, Paul Everingham, said the preference decision was a "tactical" mistake because of feeling in ethnic communities and "we have in One Nation something that is equivalent to a fascist party."

In the southern state of Victoria, Liberal state Premier Jeff Kennett and former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser have accused the Queensland coalition of providing One Nation with legitimacy and a stepping stone into federal politics.

But while Fraser -- speaking on behalf of that section of the ruling class which has become increasingly dependent on Asian export markets -- has denounced the "anti-Asian, anti-Aboriginal and anti-Semitic views" of the One Nation Party, Prime Minister Howard has claimed that its followers are "no more racist than you or I."

Howard has repeatedly refused to direct the federal Liberal Party to place One Nation last in its preferences in the forthcoming federal elections. In fact, his election timetable and tactics are to a great extent being dominated by considerations of the impact of One Nation.

The rise of this extreme right-wing formation is a manifestation of a deepening social malaise. Far-reaching economic changes, arising from the globalisation of capitalist production, including the deregulation of the Australian economy, and the "free market" policies pursued by both Liberal and Labor state and federal governments over the past decade and a half, have wreaked social havoc on the lives of millions of ordinary working people.

Large sections of the middle class -- in particular small business proprietors, self-employed contractors and farmers -- who previously voted for the National-Liberal coalition have been plunged into a downward spiral of job insecurity and economic uncertainty.

They have been joined by former Labor Party supporters who, after years of savage cuts to jobs, wages, health, education and social facilities by Labor governments, have similarly abandoned their former loyalties.

In rural areas, One Nation's support runs as high as 33 percent and the party is predicted to win at least the semi-rural seat of Gympie. The town is symptomatic of regional centres across the country.

A formerly prosperous dairy farming community, Gympie is now plagued by an unemployment rate of 15 percent, with a quarter of its population dependent on social welfare to survive. The 1996 census recorded a median individual income of just \$213 per week, with the median household income at \$433 per week, barely enough to survive.

Gympie's population has been swelled by thousands of workers, retirees and single parents forced to leave the cities to look for cheaper accommodation. During the past two years alone, the average age of the population has declined by several years as younger families move in.

But, as in so many country towns, economic prospects are worsening, with agricultural prices undergoing a steady decline and export markets contracting.

One Nation seeks to channel the growing resentment and

disaffection with official politics, the mounting opposition to budget cuts and mass unemployment, into hostility to Asian immigration and the Aboriginal population. It calls for the slashing of immigration and proposes massive cuts to Aboriginal health, housing and job programs.

At the same time, it calls for a return to tariff protection and economic regulation, the reindustrialisation of Australia, and the establishment of a "people's bank", policies which have found a certain resonance among people whose lives have been uprooted by the rapid economic changes over the past decade.

The rise of One Nation is not simply the outcome of the fears and alienation felt by wide layers of the population.

Those anxieties have been consciously manipulated by the media, which has extended saturation coverage to Pauline Hanson. Right-wing talk back radio hosts have endlessly promoted her racist and xenophobic views, while newspaper polls and headlines have been devoted to speculating on the amount of support the party will win in the Queensland elections.

Only eight supporters turned up to the official One Nation election policy launch in Ipswich, near Brisbane -- in the heart of Hanson's parliamentary seat -- well outnumbered by more than 50 representatives of the media. While the event was featured in all the major media outlets, only one report mentioned the attendance.

Hanson herself is a creation of the Liberal Party. She was initially endorsed as the official Liberal candidate in the former Labor stronghold of Oxley in the 1996 federal elections. After airing her anti-Aboriginal views in a local newspaper, she was disendorsed, but nevertheless elected as an independent -- with ongoing assistance from the local Liberal Party branch -- on a wave of hostility to the Keating Labor government.

Her maiden parliamentary speech in 1996, in which she accused Asian immigrants of swamping the country and attacked Aborigines for being showered with subsidies and welfare, received enthusiastic backing from Howard himself. Speaking at a meeting of the Queensland State Council of the Liberal Party shortly after, he declared that since his government had come to power "the pall of censorship on certain issues has been lifted."

He welcomed the fact that "people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or a racist or any of the other pejorative expressions that have been too carelessly flung around in this country whenever somebody has disagreed with what somebody has said."

Support for Hanson extends into the Liberal Party organisation itself. Her chief political adviser David Oldfield was a Liberal candidate for the New South Wales seat of Manly, in Sydney, and left his job as secretary to federal Liberal MP Tony Abbott to head the Hanson organisation.

Former West Australian Liberal MP, now an independent, Paul Filing was one of Hanson's earliest supporters. More recently, the current Liberal candidate for the federal seat of Dickson in south-eastern Queensland chaired a One Nation public launch last year.

One Nation also has links to extreme right-wing organisations whose politics mirror those of the militia groups in the United States.

The president of the party's Queensland election campaign, Tom King, was the author of a press statement issued in 1995 by the

Australian Defence Association which claimed that: "Government measures to herd all Australians into towns could leave us open to claims to the United Nations from countries like China and Indonesia wanting more land for their people."

But above all, the rise of the Hanson organisation is the product of the 13 years of federal Labor government under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, from 1983 to 1996, during which the trade union bureaucracy collaborated with the Labor leadership in the socially-destructive program dictated by the banks and international money markets.

The alienation and disaffection felt by broad masses will continue to take a malignant form until the working class begins to intervene as an independent social force, advancing its own solution to the crisis of the profit system -- a solution which places the social interests and rights of the vast majority above the profit requirements of the banks and corporations.

The danger which confronts the working class is that in the absence of a such a political movement, sections of the ruling class will be emboldened to manipulate and mobilise disoriented sections of the middle class, as well as impoverished workers and youth, in an increasingly right-wing direction as the economic and social crisis intensifies.

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