State Liberal government thrown out

Another shock election result in Australia

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Last Saturday's election in the state of Western Australia (WA) bore witness to the deep-going hostility felt by masses of ordinary people toward the political establishment. An unprecedented 30 percent of the population voted for minor parties or Independents, escalating a trend that has been developing for 15 years.

Premier Richard Court's Liberal-National coalition government was swept from office, losing half its MPs and up to six ministers. The swing against it—a massive 8 percent across the state—was nearly double the electoral shift that unseated the Kennett coalition government in the south-eastern state of Victoria 18 months earlier. Some areas were lost with swings nudging 20 per cent: Riverton, a seat in the outer suburbs of WA's capital Perth, fell from Liberal to Labor with a swing of 18.8 percent, while Albany, a country electorate, transferred after a 15.8 per cent swing. Like Victoria, the West Australian outcome shocked pollsters and media pundits, who completely failed in their predictions.

The new Labor government, led by Geoff Gallop, a close friend and confidant of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, will command a parliamentary majority of at least nine, after wresting some 14 seats from the coalition. Labor's victory constitutes the biggest turnaround in electoral fortunes in the state's history. Yet the party could muster only 37.6 percent of the vote—the second worst Australian Labor Party (ALP) result ever, just 1.8 percent higher than the vote it received at the last WA election in 1996, when Court won in a landslide.

While Gallop and federal Labor opposition leader, Kim Beazley, were reportedly jubilant, the WA party's gains were due almost entirely to a flow of second preference votes from the Greens, an array of Independents and the extreme right-wing outfit, One Nation. Without them, Labor could not have gained a majority.

Independents, including Liberals for Forests—a split-off from the Liberal Party opposed to Court's logging of old-growth forests—won more than 9 percent of the primary vote. The Greens polled 7 percent, 2 percent more than in the last state election, while One Nation polled 9.6 percent statewide, a drop of 1 percent from the last federal election. One Nation's vote reflected a sharp urban/rural divide, with its candidates winning 7 percent in metropolitan seats, but an average of 16 percent in country areas. Four Independents will sit in the parliamentary lower house, while the Greens and One Nation are likely to hold the balance of power in the upper house. The Greens will have five or six upper house MPs, and One Nation, two or three.

Like Labor and the Coalition, the Democrats, who hold the balance of power in the Senate (the federal parliament's upper house), also saw their primary vote savaged. Promoting themselves as moderates intent on “keeping the bastards (Labor and Liberal) honest”, the Democrats faced their first electoral test since cutting a deal with Prime Minister Howard in late 1999 to allow the introduction of a new Goods and Services Tax (GST). Their vote more than halved to just 2.8 percent, and they lost their two seats in the state's upper house.

Preferential voting

Labor's emphatic victory in WA, on the back of a historically low vote, highlights a significant process that has been underway during the past several years.

Since Federation a century ago, Australian politics has been dominated by the two-party system, where both sides, Labor and the conservatives—Liberal and National (or their equivalents)—are committed to the capitalist economic and social order. Preferential voting was initiated in 1918 after the splitting of the conservative side into two: one party (the Country Party, later renamed the National Party) based in the rural areas and the other (since 1944, the Liberal Party) oriented to metropolitan voters.

Unique to Australia, preferential voting was introduced by the conservatives to amalgamate their vote and prevent Labor gaining office. More fundamentally, however, it has worked to firewall the establishment parties, and the system they defend, rendering it almost impossible for candidates from any party advancing a genuine alternative—in particular, socialist organisations—to win seats.

It works thus: if a candidate fails to win 50 percent or more of the primary—or “first preference”—votes, then the second (and, if necessary, third, fourth, etc) preferences of the lowest-scoring candidates are distributed to the higher-scoring candidates until someone eventually receives 50 percent. If a vote count goes to preferences, they carry the same weight as primary votes.

Theoretically, a candidate who wins the most primary votes—up to 49 percent—in a three or more-sided contest, can still lose the election if he or she is given last preference by all the other candidates.

In the 1970s and 80s, 92 percent of primary votes were cast for the major parties. But in the 90s, this decreased to 84 percent. In the last federal election in October 1998 the primary vote fell below 80 percent and in the 1999 New South Wales state election it dropped another 5 percent. The WA election has seen a further fall of 5 percent to a historic low of 70 percent.

Non-aligned “Independents” and minor parties now command the support of one in three voters, and their preferences are increasingly determining the outcome of elections. Where once swings of 7 or 8 percent were unheard of, today they are commonplace. The preference system, previously a pillar of stability and predictability, has, as a result of widespread popular disaffection with the major parties, turned into its opposite.

One Nation and the break-up of the Coalition

Great media play has been made of the “resurgence” of One Nation and its electoral impact. Just one year ago, the right-wing populist organisation had all but collapsed, torn apart by sordid internal back-biting, splits and defections, as well as a concerted campaign on the part of the media and the ruling elite to destroy its capacity to function as an electoral “spoiler”. In Queensland, where One Nation attracted 23 percent of the vote in the 1998 state election, winning 11 parliamentary seats, the Supreme Court ordered its deregistration, while in both NSW and Queensland its offices

were ransacked by police. Opinion polls registered a precipitate drop in voter support, from a high of around 8 percent nationally, to just 2 percent.

With virtually no organisational structure, the party's WA campaign consisted of a whirlwind tour by leader Pauline Hanson the week before the poll. There were no policies, no political program and no campaign launch. In an open appeal to the prevailing sentiments of anger and resentment against all politicians, particularly in rural areas, Hanson advanced just one slogan: “put sitting MPs last”—i.e. allocate to all parliamentarians, whatever their political affiliation, last preference on the ballot paper.

This policy, which attracted some 10 percent of the vote, contributed to the swing against the government, along with the predominantly anti-Coalition preferences of the Greens and Independents. Gerard Henderson, executive director of the right-wing think tank, the Sydney Institute, commented in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 13 that no-one would have imagined, 80 years ago, that the preferential system “would be used in rural areas as a political weapon to demonstrate alienation from or disenchantment with, the political system itself.... It was not envisaged that a minor party would direct its preferences against incumbents—irrespective of which party they belonged to.”

Formed in 1996 as an offshoot of the Coalition parties, One Nation was expected to direct its preferences to the Liberal and National parties. But having been repeatedly refused preference deals by Coalition leaders since the party's unanticipated 1998 success in Queensland, and thereby denied any chance of winning further seats, Hanson took her revenge by attacking all incumbents.

This has placed Prime Minister Howard on the horns of a dilemma. Federal and state National Party MPs, the Liberals' coalition partners based in the bush, are staring defeat in the face and demanding the right to cut deals with One Nation. Howard needs the rural vote—especially the one million that went to Hanson in the last federal election—to remain in office, just as much as the Nationals. But if he accedes to their demands, he risks losing the Liberal Party's urban electoral base, where opposition to One Nation's bigoted and backward views runs deep.

Underpinning Howard's difficulties lies a more fundamental process: deep ruptures in the Coalition, presaging the breakup of the conservative city/rural bloc forged more than 80 years ago. Divisions between the Liberals and Nationals over privatisation and the destruction of services in the bush, the federal government's GST and fuel excise have been widening, with tensions spilling over into public brawls. Rather than being the cause of the Coalition's demise, One Nation is, more accurately, one of its consequences. By means of populist railings and appeals to rural voter discontent, One Nation seeks to fill the political vacuum left by the National Party in the wake of the Coalition's abandonment of protectionism and economic regulation. By year's end, Hanson's outfit could well have replaced the Nationals as the party of the bush.

Social polarisation

At the heart of the conflicts wracking the bourgeoisie and the mounting political instability lie rapidly escalating class tensions. During the past decade and a half, Australia has become one of the most socially and economically polarised nations in the so-called developed world. A study conducted by the charity organisation St Vincent de Paul in 1999 revealed more than two million people—more than 10 percent of the population—living in poverty on the fringes of cities or in rural areas. In its report, the charity used the term “social apartheid” to describe the extent of the chasm separating the country's wealthy and impoverished regions.

The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling found that after nearly 10 years of continuous economic growth, the poorest 20 percent of the population were surviving on an average weekly income of just $124 during the financial year 1997-98. The richest 20 percent took home an average of $1,590 per week. Although the average wage for that year was $658, around 70 percent of the population earned less.

Moreover, the income of those on less than half the median wage fell by 2 percent in the 15-year period to 1996-97. By contrast, those earning more than 175 percent of the median enjoyed an increase of 18 percent, or $229 per week.

Deregulation, privatisations, the slashing of government expenditure on public hospitals, housing, schools and universities, the gutting of services and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of permanent full-time jobs have left ordinary working class families reeling.

According to the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, almost one third of the working population feel they have lost control of their lives and constantly fear losing their jobs. Among those earning less than $400 per week, the figure was over 40 percent.

While elections provide a highly distorted picture of class relations, dominated as they are by the mass media's disorientation and manipulation of public opinion and its suppression of genuinely dissenting views, they nevertheless reveal certain tendencies.

From the federal election in 1996 through to last weekend's election there has been a definite—and intensifying—mood of opposition to “economic rationalism,” “mutual obligation” and “user pays” policies, all aimed at bolstering profits at the expense of the working class.

Since 1996, every conservative party/government, both state and federally, has suffered a drastic decline in its vote. In the 1998 federal election, the Howard government scraped back into office, but with fewer primary votes than Labor. In the past three years, conservative state governments have fallen in Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and now Western Australia, leaving only one, in South Australia. Moreover, Labor won two Victorian by-elections—Burwood, a safe Liberal seat with a swing of 10.5 percent, and Benalla, held for 57 years by the National Party, with a total swing of more than 15 percent. In 1999, the NSW Labor government held onto office, while the vote for the Liberals and Nationals fell dramatically.

Labor's vote, while not declining as far, has remained historically low, and in some working class areas, has plummetted. In government, Labor introduced the reign of privatisation, deregulation and “restructuring” and was responsible for doubling the levels of social inequality between the rich and poor. It committed itself ferociously to free market policies, and the Keating government was dumped in 1996 as a result. Federal leader Kim Beazley has spent the past five years trying to distance himself from the policies of the Hawke and Keating years. At the same time, in legislative terms, the Labor Opposition has functioned as a virtual third arm of the Coalition.

Most traditional Labor voters—workers, students, layers of professional and middle class people whose lives have become dominated by uncertainty—view the party with contempt. Their turn to the Greens and various Independents expresses in electoral form a revolt against the major parties and a certain, albeit confused, move to the left—in a desperate search for some illusory “lesser evil”—within the ossified framework of parliamentary politics.

In the days since the WA poll a sense of panic has pervaded the corridors of power. On Monday, the prime minister called an emergency cabinet meeting, where measures designed to appease rural voters and small business were hurriedly adopted. On Wednesday, opening the Sydney headquarters of the world's sixth largest bank, he pointed to the negative consequences of globalisation and called for greater “sensitivity” on the part of government and business.

But the clearest indication of the current state of mind of the ruling class was provided by Beazley. Australian society, he said during a campaign bus tour of regional NSW, was no longer egalitarian. Fault lines were opening up—and widening—over income, access to information, and between regions and cities. “And when fault lines open up, as any good seismologist will tell you, there are chances of an earthquake.”

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