

Australian election delivers first hung parliament in 70 years

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23 August 2010

Saturday's Australian federal election has produced a hung parliament, the first since 1940, triggering an enormous crisis for the Australian ruling elite and presaging heightened political and social instability.

Such was the extent of popular disaffection with the entire electoral process that neither the Labor Party nor the Liberal-National coalition was able to win a majority. Instead, the next government will be determined by a series of backroom manoeuvres and horse-trading by the leaders of both major parties with a handful of independent parliamentarians.

With around 80 percent of the vote counted, Labor appears to have secured 70 seats and the coalition 72—both short of the 76 majority. The Greens won their first lower—House of Representatives—seat in a federal election, independent candidates won 3, and another 4 seats remain undecided. One of the undecided seats may go to independent Andrew Wilkie, a former intelligence analyst who resigned in March 2003 over the weapons of mass destruction lies in the lead up to the Iraq war, while the other three will go to either Labor or Liberal, depending on the remaining, as yet uncounted, votes.

The result stands as a decisive repudiation of the Labor government. Its predecessor, the conservative government of John Howard, was thrown out of office in 2007 because of widespread popular anger over the Iraq war, WorkChoices industrial legislation, attacks on democratic rights, the police-military Northern Territory intervention against Aboriginal communities, the brutal treatment of refugees, climate change, and heightened household debt and economic insecurity. But on every issue, Kevin Rudd and his successor as prime minister, Julia Gillard effected a seamless transition, breaking all their election undertakings to advance a more progressive social and economic agenda. The Rudd and Gillard governments proved just as committed as their Liberal counterparts to the interests of big business and finance capital.

The June 23-24 coup against Kevin Rudd, however, marked a watershed in the deepening hostility to Labor. The factional apparatchiks and trade union bureaucrats who installed Julia

Gillard badly miscalculated the extent of the anger generated throughout the population by their anti-democratic actions. Despite the Labor Party's best efforts to dismiss it, the issue shadowed Gillard's entire campaign, only rising in prominence as election day drew nearer.

Labor's primary vote stands at 38 percent, down 5.4 percent from 2007. The opposition proved unable to capitalise, however, with the Liberal and National parties increasing their combined vote by just 1.8 percent to 43.9 percent.

Most of the primary votes lost by Labor went to the Greens, who gained 3.7 percent for a total of 11.5 percent—the highest vote ever recorded for a minor party in a federal election, and reflecting a shift to the left, among young people in particular. While the Greens are a capitalist party, committed to the profit system and to upholding “parliamentary stability”, they made a direct appeal to disaffected voters on the basis of claiming opposition to the Afghanistan war, support for more humane treatment of asylum seekers, and for lower greenhouse gas emissions. They defeated Labor in the Victorian inner city electorate of Melbourne, previously held by outgoing Labor Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner, and are expected to hold the balance of power in the Senate after increasing their seats from five to nine.

A record number of people voted informal, returning blank ballots or scrawling messages of protest on their voting papers, reflecting the level of disgust felt towards the entire parliamentary set-up. Under Australia's compulsory voting system, voters are fined if they fail to check their name off at polling stations. More than 600,000 people, or 5.6 percent of all voters, voted informal, up from 4 percent in 2007. This was especially marked in working class electorates, where as many as 14 percent returned informal ballots, especially in Western Sydney.

Western Sydney, where official unemployment often exceeds 10 percent, also saw a huge anti-Labor primary vote swing, as did southern Brisbane, where the jobless rates are as high as 20 percent. In Fowler, covering parts of Sydney's southwest,

Labor's primary vote plunged by 15.9 percentage points to 53.8 percent. Other large falls occurred in Chifley (12 percent lower), Reid (11.2 percent), Werriwa (9.8 percent), Parramatta (8.9 percent) and Blaxland (8.4 percent). In Bennelong, a mid-northern Sydney electorate with a more mixed population including many professionals, Labor's vote dropped by 11.1 percent, handing the seat lost in 2007 by former Prime Minister John Howard back to the Liberals.

The 2007 result in Bennelong marked the first time since 1929 that a sitting prime minister had failed to win his own seat. Even more significantly, the national 2010 election result marks the first time since 1931 that an incumbent government has failed to win a majority after one term in office. The historical parallels point to the escalating crisis of the two-party system, which has dominated Australian political life for the past century.

Various Labor commentators have advanced a series of facile and self-serving explanations for the Gillard government's debacle. Two of the orchestrators of the coup, Labor's national secretary Karl Bitar and Australian Workers Union chief Paul Howes, for example, have blamed it on the series of leaks that emerged in the second week of the campaign.

What proved damaging, however, was not the leaks themselves, but their content. As one damaging leak followed another, the electorate was afforded a small glimpse into the real motivations and calculations of the Labor government. Media reports of internal Labor cabinet discussions included revelations of Gillard's hostility to introducing paid parental leave and increasing the aged pension payment ("old people never vote for us", she reportedly told her colleagues). The prime minister sought to defend herself by boasting of her commitment to lower government spending—winning plaudits from the corporate media but heightening concerns among ordinary working people already outraged over poverty-level income support for the elderly and the absence of any significant assistance for new parents.

Big business and the media have greeted the Australian election outcome with deep anxiety. Amid the greatest global economic crisis since the 1930s and mounting great power rivalry, driven by the historic decline of the US, their "worse case scenario" is a weak minority government. Now neither of the major parties can even attempt to claim a mandate for the measures being demanded by the corporate elite—above all sweeping public spending cuts as part of a permanent austerity drive and an agenda of wide-ranging free market reform.

The editorial in today's *Australian Financial Review* was typical, albeit more frank than most: "Regardless of whether the coalition's Tony Abbott or Labor's Julia Gillard leads it,

this is the worst possible outcome for stable government and the unpopular economic reforms required to reinforce the Australian economy against another global recession, the expiry of the resources boom and the challenges of an ageing population... All this uncertainty will not help Australia's reputation with international investors, which has already been tarnished by Labor's bungling of the minerals tax. One of the first tasks of the next prime minister will be to reassure the rest of the world that the government is committed to stability, fiscal discipline and reform."

The three independent parliamentarians—Bob Katter, Tony Windsor, and Rob Oakeshott—are now in discussions with both Labor and Liberal. They are all former National Party members, representing rural constituencies in New South Wales and Queensland, who quit the party in protest against its free market, deregulatory measures. All three have made clear that, in addition to looking for "stable government", the price of their support will be large spending programs in their electorates and other rural regions, including on telecommunications and infrastructure. Another, less likely, possibility is that, in the event that Labor wins most of the remaining undecided seats, it could form a minority government backed by Greens' Melbourne MP Adam Bandt and independent Andrew Wilkie.

For the ruling elite, both scenarios are equally unwelcome—which is why there is growing speculation that another federal election may soon be triggered in an effort to break the parliamentary deadlock.

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