After the Australian election: The way forward for the working class

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The hung parliament that emerged from Saturday's election is a further expression of the deepening crisis of the parliamentary system both in Australia and internationally.

Not since 1931 has a first-time government failed to be returned to office and there has been no hung parliament since 1940. The fact that these events occurred in the depths of the Great Depression and the opening phase of World War II, respectively, points to the intensity of the economic and political tensions underlying the present outcome.

The result has shaken the political establishment. An editorial in the *Australian* declared: "The election has delivered a severe shock to the predominantly two-party system that has served the nation well since federation." Another comment noted that the result "announced the smashing of the smug two-party system which has dominated Australian politics since World War II." This underscores the fact that, contrary to the myth of exceptionalism, no country is more sensitive to global economic and political turbulence. Less than four months after the British election resulted in a hung parliament, Australia has one too. Likewise in Canada, the past three elections have produced minority governments and political crises that have shut down parliament.

Two months ago, the political coup that ousted Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd cast a revealing light on the real forces that operate behind the facade of so-called parliamentary democracy and exercise real power. These same corporate and financial elites, along with the state apparatus itself, will determine the composition and agenda of the next government.

For the ruling class, the inability of both major parties to form a stable government signifies that parliamentary mechanisms are becoming increasingly unviable under conditions of deepening global economic crisis and heightening geo-political tensions. "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," declared the *Australian Financial Review.*

The newspaper warned that whatever government emerged from the negotiations with the three independents "neither combination bodes well for the revival of a serious economic reform agenda" and that there was a risk of "reform paralysis" creating uncertainty that "will not help Australia's reputation with international investors."

"One of the first tasks of the next prime minister," it continued, "will be to reassure the rest of the world that the government is committed to stability, fiscal discipline and reform. This will not be easy given the likely make-up of the government, but it will have to be done."

In other words, in line with governments around the world, the primary question is not meeting the needs and aspirations of the voters but retaining the confidence of international financial markets through a "reform" agenda of fiscal austerity and attacks on the social position of the working class.

Likewise, the *Australian* noted that the mandate to govern "belongs to the party that offers the best hope of stability without sacrificing the national interest." Compromises would "extend the holiday from reform, at least in the short term" and "accommodation and appeasement will be the order of the day until a fresh election provides a more decisive outcome."

There is no guarantee, however, that another election would produce a more stable parliamentary regime. That is why, in order to enforce their agenda, the ruling elites will turn increasingly to extra-parliamentary measures.

The coup against Rudd, orchestrated by Labor apparatchiks at the behest of powerful corporate interests, and with the support and knowledge, if not direct connivance, of American intelligence forces, was the first step in this direction. It will be followed by others.

Just as the ruling class cannot proceed in the old way, neither can the working class.

The August 21 election was the latest in a series that has revealed escalating political volatility produced by the inability of ordinary working people and youth to advance their needs and interests through the parliamentary system.

The March 1996 election saw a massive swing against Labor, above all in working class electorates, amid deep opposition to the "economic reform" agenda carried out by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Less than three years later, in 1998, the Howard government lost the overall popular vote and would have lost office after just one term

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were it not for the vagaries of the parliamentary system, which gave it a majority of seats.

In 2001, the Coalition government was again heading for electoral defeat, until it manufactured the Tampa refugee "crisis" and then exploited the terror attacks of September 11 to secure its re-election.

In 2004, Howard enjoyed a positive swing, with Labor's primary vote dropping to its lowest level since 1931. The result gave the government a majority in the Senate, for the first time since the late 1970s. But Howard's attempt to exploit its majority by pushing through the draconian WorkChoices industrial legislation only created a major backlash, contributing significantly to its defeat in November 2007. Rudd Labor came to power with a sizeable majority.

Now, less than three years later, opposition to both major parties has produced a hung parliament.

Common to all these electoral gyrations has been the attempt by workers to advance their interests by punishing first one, and then the other, major party. At the same time the putrefaction of the entire official political establishment has seen the rise of independents and the growth of the Greens.

In 2010, the shift against Labor was highest in working class electorates in Queensland and NSW, especially those with high levels of unemployment. These areas also registered a large informal protest.

At the same time, hostility to Labor, especially over its failure to deal with climate change, saw a record vote for the Greens. In 1998 the Greens recorded a vote of 2.6 percent for the House of Representatives and 2.7 percent for the Senate. In this election, it was 11.4 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

But a vote for the Greens provides no way forward, any more than swings from Labor to Liberal or informal protest votes. With the balance of power in the Senate, the Greens have emphasised their main concern is "stability"—i.e., supporting the agenda of whichever of the two major parties forms government.

It is time to draw a balance sheet. There is no solution to the pressing problems confronting the working class within the framework of the parliamentary system. Indeed, the very crisis of the system originates in profound shifts in the economic foundations of society, necessitating a new political orientation in the working class.

The globalisation of production and the ever-more pressing domination of global financial markets over every national economy have produced the collapse of the old program of reforms through pressuring this or that government. The policies of every national government are determined not by popular vote, but by the dictates of powerful global financial and corporate elites.

Indeed, the impact of these processes finds direct expression in the present parliamentary crisis. The three country independents, whose votes will determine which party comes to power, broke from the National Party as it adopted the "free market" agenda dictated by global finance. Their attempt to reintroduce greater national regulation will end in failure, just as surely as successive attempts to shift the political agenda through protest votes or voting Green.

The working class must strike out on a new road that expresses the economic and political realities of the twenty-first century. This new orientation was the axis of the SEP election campaign. We insisted that the perspective of national reform via parliament has been shattered by vast changes in the global economy and that the working class must develop its own independent political movement on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The anger, frustration and volatility reflected in the election result express profound social and political realities. The transformation of Labor and the unions into open instruments of the ruling elites means that workers have no organisations through which to fight. They have been forced into a fruitless quest to find individual solutions for what are social problems. This crisis can only be resolved through the building of a new mass party of the working class.

There is no way forward for the working class through the decaying parliamentary system. Indeed, so long as workers remain trapped within it, they will be completely unprepared for the new, extra-parliamentary measures being prepared behind the scenes.

The SEP received important support in the election campaign, reflected in the increase in its vote. Even more important, however, were the thousands of workers, students and youth who came into contact with the party's analysis and program. We urge all those who supported the SEP's campaign to give the most serious consideration to its principles and perspective, apply to join its ranks and begin the task of building the new revolutionary party of the working class.

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Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

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