

The Australian election outcome

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The outcome of the Australian election, which has seen the return of a minority Labor government supported by the Greens and three independents, further demonstrates the utter putrefaction of the parliamentary system.

Taken as a whole, the 10-week process—from the ousting of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in a parliamentary coup on June 23-24 to the agreement of two rural-based independents to back Labor on September 7—has been the means through which powerful sections of the corporate, media and financial ruling elites have secured the installation of a more right-wing government.

On June 24, the WSWWS stated: “The circumstances of Rudd’s removal are a graphic exposure of the thoroughly worm-eaten character of both the Labor Party and the entire system of so-called parliamentary democracy in Australia.” That assessment has been powerfully vindicated over the past two and a half months.

This unstable government may not last, but whatever its immediate fate, the content of the process as a whole is clear. With no mass support for any of the major parties, the political system will move further to the right, assuming an even more anti-democratic and manipulated character.

From the outset, the political and media establishment came together to prevent any examination of the real reasons for the ousting of Rudd and the forces that organised it. Gillard simply repeated the line that the government had “lost its way” while a compliant Canberra press gallery, citing highly-manipulated opinion polls as the reason for Rudd’s demise, never pressed her any further. Instead, it sought to deflect attention from the real issues by retailing stories of Rudd’s personality and his office management style. Never once, at any of the numerous press conferences and interviews, was the question asked: what was the attitude of the United States administration to the ousting of Rudd? Were there any

policy differences on China, Afghanistan or any other major question?

Nor was there any probing of the involvement of the giant transnational mining companies in the coup. The chilling remarks by Rio Tinto chief Tom Albanese following Rudd’s ousting that policy makers in other countries had to “think carefully” before considering the “Australian approach” of a resources tax, barely rated a mention.

Immediately after she came to power, Gillard demonstrated the right-wing turn of her government. She withdrew the proposed mining tax and redrafted it with the collaboration of mining industry chiefs, pledged unconditional and continuing total support to the US and its war in Afghanistan, and sought to whip up hostility against asylum seekers and refugees under the slogan of “strong border protection”.

The election itself was hastily called, with the shortest possible campaign period, with the aim of trying to prevent any probing of the circumstances of the June coup.

The five-week campaign was a mockery of democracy. No issues or policies were seriously presented or discussed. Instead there was an endless repetition of vacuous slogans and sound bites as the leaders of both parties sought to remain “on message”. The issue of greatest concern to the Labor leaders was not the alienation from and disaffection with their party among broad layers of the population, but the damaging impact of leaks of Cabinet discussions. The damage to Labor’s electoral standing was not caused by the leaks themselves but by what they revealed—that Gillard was far more concerned with the budget bottom line and the demands of the financial markets than with meeting the urgent economic and social needs of the working class.

The election took place amid the most far-reaching economic crisis since the Great Depression – a meltdown that in October 2008 threatened to push the major Australian banks into insolvency. Yet the significance of this breakdown and its implications were never raised. The reason is that both the major parties were well aware that whichever of them formed government the new regime would follow its counterparts around the world and implement the austerity measures being dictated by financial markets.

Likewise, the vast shifts now underway in the global balance of power, in particular, rising tensions between the US and China, rated no mention, notwithstanding the fact that serious foreign policy analysts have been warning that they could lead to war, in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, possibly involving nuclear weapons. Nor was the war in Afghanistan raised, even as the number of deaths of Australian troops began to rise and the neo-colonial character of the war became increasingly exposed. While opinion polls ratings were claimed to be the decisive factor in the removal of Rudd, the fact that more than 60 percent of the Australian people oppose the Afghanistan war was simply brushed aside.

The return of a hung parliament on August 21 was an expression of the deepening hostility among wide sections of the population to the entire official establishment. But the two-and-a-half weeks of negotiations that followed were dominated by the issue of forming a “stable” government. Not a government that addresses the problems, needs and concerns of the population, but one that will carry through what editorialists refer to as the “unpopular reforms that are needed to revive productivity and keep Australia competitive in an increasingly challenging world”.

The Greens are fully committed to this agenda, declaring their primary concern was a secure government for the next three years, whichever party formed it. Far from representing an alternative to the official political establishment and the existing socio-economic order they are a key component of it.

No one should be under any illusion that the policies of the Gillard government will be determined by the deals and horse-trading since the election, over resources for regional areas, with the independents. Any serious downturn in the economic situation and these measures

will be blown away. Nor will Labor’s agenda be shaped on the floor of parliament—notwithstanding the general hailing of a series of “democratic” parliamentary reforms. It will be determined by the demands of global financial markets and the corporate ruling elites in Australia and internationally.

If such an agenda cannot be implemented through the present parliamentary set-up, other methods will be employed. In this respect, it is highly significant that Gillard made a direct appeal to the opposition Liberals in her “victory” speech. The question of a coalition government has been raised in various forms on more than one occasion since the hung parliament result. This would be an authoritarian parliamentary bloc dedicated to imposing the harsh measures that will be demanded under worsening global economic conditions and rising geopolitical tensions.

Other extra-parliamentary measures are also being discussed behind closed doors. The coup of June 23-24 and everything that has followed have been a warning of what is to come.

The Socialist Equality Party stood candidates in this election to alert working people to these dangers and to develop a new political movement of the working class, entirely independent of the decaying parliamentary regime and all its parties, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective, to meet the challenges and upheavals that lie directly ahead. The election outcome underscores that the central issue we raised—the building of a new mass revolutionary party of the working class—is more necessary now than ever.

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