

# Record number of groups contest Australian election

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A revealing feature of the Australian election campaign has been the unprecedented proliferation of new political parties, despite the anti-democratic requirements of the electoral laws. Just to have the right to have their name on the ballot paper, parties must hand over the names and details of 500 members to authorities, face intrusive scrutiny of their financial records, and pay heavy candidate's fees.

A record 54 parties have registered with the Australian Electoral Commission—more than double the 24 on the list for the previous federal election in 2010 up from the 16 that initially registered when the Hawke Labor government first imposed the party registration system in 1984.

There is also a host of “independents.” Altogether, 110 candidates will contest the six Senate positions up for election in the state of New South Wales, for example—an increase from 84 in 2010 and 40 in 1984.

The higher number of candidates has been seized on within the political and media establishment to push for further anti-democratic ballot access restrictions. The election analyst with the ABC public broadcaster, Antony Green, has declared that “it is just not acceptable to have a system that requires people to use a magnifying glass to cast an informed vote on who will run the country.” The *Australian* reported on Monday that “electoral commentators are discussing the need for tighter requirements for the registration of parties and higher nomination fees”, and today featured an opinion piece by the National Party Senator Ron Boswell, insisting that “this is far closer to anarchy than democracy... I am in agreement with [Antony] Green that this Senate election system has to be changed in the future because it is simply ridiculous the way it operates.”

At the heart of the fragmentation of the political establishment is the collapse of the traditional social constituencies of the two major ruling parties, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, whose program of national economic regulation was undermined by the globalisation of production from the 1980s.

Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, working hand in glove with the union movement, abandoned its previous program of limited social reforms and ruthlessly implemented the free market agenda carried out by British Prime Minister Thatcher and US President Reagan.

Amid a widening social gulf between rich and poor, the Labor Party lost the active support of any significant section of the working class, which it has never recovered. Successive Labor and Coalition governments have deepened the assault on jobs and

living standards and led to a profound alienation from the entire establishment.

The mushrooming of parties is one symptom of popular hostility toward the major parties of the political establishment—Labor, Liberal-National and the Greens. These formations are seeking to tap into the sense among broad layers of people, especially young people, that their needs and aspirations find no expression whatsoever within the existing political set-up.

At the same time, with the sole exception of the Socialist Equality Party, all these parties are striving, in one form or another, to divert the discontent back into the increasingly discredited framework of the parliamentary order. Most are not political parties in any meaningful sense, but purely electoral formations, wheeling and dealing for positions and influence within parliamentary set-up.

Among the 54 registered parties is a plethora of interest groups, purporting to represent all manner of causes and lifestyle issues. They range from three rival fishing and shooting organisations to several drug law reform or “smokers’ rights” formations, alongside multiple Christian fundamentalist organisations, including Family First. Others range from the single-issue Bank Reform Party and Bullet Train for Australia, to the frivolous Coke in the Bubblers Party.

Several parties are making a calculated pitch to disaffected young people. The WikiLeaks Party, built around the personality of Julian Assange, has condemned various attacks on democratic rights, exemplified by the illegal mass surveillance by the US government and its allies, including Australia, of everyone's phone and Internet communications. This disparate amalgam of disaffected Liberals, right-wing libertarians and various currents of middle class protest politics is already breaking up, even before the election. (See: “WikiLeaks Party mired in crisis”)

Likewise, the Pirate Party has criticised the prosecution of whistleblowers Assange, Edward Snowden and Bradley Manning. Following in the footsteps of its counterparts in Europe, it combines calls for Internet freedom, with a right-wing program that advocates cuts to welfare—to provide “incentives to work”—and a dramatic reduction in company tax.

Several parties oppose particular aspects of the bipartisan big business program pursued by Labor and Liberal-National. These include the Stop CSG [Coal Seam Gas] Party, the Carers Alliance, and the Single Parents Party. The latter was formed to protest the government's decision to cut the already meagre welfare benefits

to single parents, and force them onto sub-poverty line unemployment payments.

Other parties and “independents” are trying to exploit the social crisis in rural and regional areas where infrastructure, jobs and services has been devastated under successive Labor and Coalition governments. Katter’s Australia Party, founded by federal parliamentarian Bob Katter, a former senior National, seeks to channel the disaffection into reactionary nationalism and protectionism. (See: “Katter’s Australian Party: A nationalist political trap”)

A slew of extreme right wing and nationalist formations, with names like Australian Protectionist Party, Australia First Party, One Nation and Rise Up Australia, are denouncing refugees, migrants and other minority groups. The emergence of such groups is a direct product of the policies of Labor and Coalition governments, which have themselves sought to divert attention from their own roles in devastating the lives of working people by scapegoating asylum seekers, abrogating their fundamental democratic rights.

A number of parties articulate the interests of sections of business. The Sex Party, which attempts to garner a protest vote by posturing as an opponent of censorship, represents the pornography and sex products industry. The Building Australia Party voices the agenda of property developers. The most lavishly funded is the Palmer United Party, formed this year by outspoken mining magnate Clive Palmer as a political vehicle for his corporate requirements. Many of Palmer’s candidates are his relatives, executives or employees. His outfit is seeking to shift the official agenda even further in a “free market” direction to boost corporate profits, particularly via the slashing of taxes for business and the wealthy.

Also in the mix are two former “third” parties—the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) and the Australian Democrats. Both have sniffed the political winds of disaffection and hope to reprise their previous roles of propping up Labor or Liberal governments. In fact, the DLP, a right-wing anti-communist party that kept Liberal governments in office from the 1950s to the 1970s, picked up a Senate seat at the 2010 election on the back of preferences from other groups.

The Australian Democrats, established in 1977 by Don Chipp, a former Liberal minister, appealed to small “I” liberals and sections of the middle class and small business disaffected by the turn of both the Liberal and Labor parties to open market big business agendas. The Democrats’ posture of keeping the two major parties “honest” collapsed after 1999, however, when they supported the imposition of the regressive Goods and Services Tax.

The Democrats’ place in the parliamentary order was largely supplanted by the Greens, who have formed partnerships with both Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal level over the past two decades. Formally founded in 1992, the Greens initially appealed to sections of youth and the middle class who opposed environmental destruction and Australian involvement in the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the past three years, they became widely discredited by their de facto coalition with the minority Labor government as it intensified the assault on refugees, public education and welfare.

The “new parties,” however, offer no alternative. They are totally consumed by the small change of parliamentary politics. They have bartered with each other, and the major parties, for sordid vote preference-swapping deals in the hope of gaining a seat in the Senate. They have no historical foundations, principles or programs, and none claim to represent the interests of the working class, the vast majority of the population. They exhibit all the same traits as the repeated unsuccessful attempts since the late 1970s to form alternative “third parties” or single issue parties to capture discontent, while keeping it under the wing of the corporate elite.

One of the most short-lived was the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP), formed for the 1984 election by figures such as rock singer Peter Garrett to protest against Labor’s go ahead for uranium mining, its close strategic and military alignment with the US and the danger of nuclear war. A disparate and opportunist electoral formation, it broke apart in 1985. Garrett soon headed for the Labor Party, becoming a cabinet minister under Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, while others moved to the Greens. It was likewise with the No Aircraft Noise (NAN) party, formed to oppose a third runway at Sydney airport in 1995-96. It lasted for one federal election.

Involved in both the NDP and NAN debacles was the pseudo-left outfit, Socialist Alliance, which is the only other group, apart from the SEP, contesting the 2013 election with the word socialist in its name. Socialist Alliance has nothing to do with socialism. It is continuing to try to breathe life back into the existing political set-up, urging voters to allocate preferences to the Greens and Labor on the fraudulent basis that they represent a “lesser evil” to the Liberal-National Coalition.

In opposition to all these formations, the Socialist Equality Party is seeking to provide the workers and young people with a clear-sighted socialist perspective, based on the struggle to unify the working class globally for the overthrow of the crisis-ridden capitalist profit system. Unlike every other formation, the SEP has powerful historical foundations, and an intransigent record of fighting for Marxist principle, as the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky 75 years ago, in 1938.

The repulsion that wide layers of ordinary people now feel toward the political establishment is not enough, by itself, to answer the intensified drive to war, austerity and police-state measures that will be unleashed after the election, regardless of whether Liberal or Labor forms the next government. For the immense social and class battles that lie ahead, the working class requires a genuine revolutionary leadership. That is the axis of the SEP’s intervention into the election campaign.



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