

Australian by-election reveals voter disaffection

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A federal by-election last Saturday for the seat of Griffith, vacated by former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, revealed widespread disaffection with all the parliamentary parties. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) suffered a further swing against it, despite the growing unpopularity of the Liberal-National Coalition of Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his Queensland state counterpart, Premier Campbell Newman.

While postal and pre-poll votes are still being counted, Labor appears to have barely held onto the seat, which it has held almost continuously since 1977. The ALP vote now sits on just 39 percent, behind the Liberal National Party on 43.6 percent. To retain the electorate, Labor will depend on second preference votes from the Greens, who polled 10.1 percent, and smaller parties and independents.

It is now five months since the landslide defeat of the Rudd government in last September's national election, in which Labor's vote dropped nearly 5 points to 33 percent—its lowest in 110 years. Despite opinion polls pointing to falling national support for the Coalition, support for Labor in Griffith has continued to drop.

Labor's vote fell by 1.4 percentage points from September's election, on top of a 5.5 point slump in Rudd's vote in September, and a 3.9 percent drop in the 2010 federal election. Overall this is a slump of more than 10 percent since Rudd was elected prime minister in 2007. The biggest swings against Labor were in the more working class areas of the electorate, such as Buranda, Holland Park and Mount Gravatt, where its vote fell by around 5 percent.

The implosion in the Labor Party's electoral support follows six years in office federally, from 2007 to 2013, and two decades in power in Queensland prior to its devastating defeat in the 2012 state election. Both in Canberra and Brisbane, the Labor governments

ruthlessly enforced the dictates of the financial and corporate elite at the expense of the working class, slashing social spending, cutting public sector jobs and privatising services.

An indicator of far wider disenchantment with the entire political establishment was the very low turnout in the by-election. Attendance at many polling booths was noticeably sparse. Vote counting is still continuing, but the tally suggests that about 20 percent of enrolled voters failed to cast a ballot, even though voting is compulsory and non-voting is punished by fines. The comparable figure for the September election was just 7 percent and is 10 percent on average for by-elections historically.

The low turnout defied intensive campaigns by the major parties. Voters were hit with an avalanche of printed campaign material, as well as nightly automated “robo” phone calls from candidates and last-week television advertising blitzes. Both Prime Minister Abbott and Labor leader Bill Shorten personally launched their party's campaigns, and toured the electorate to support the rival candidates.

The result did not reflect positive support for the Abbott government. Liberal National Party candidate Bill Glasson, a high-profile former Australian Medical Association president, spent the entire campaign trying to distance himself from the spending cutbacks being inflicted by the Abbott and Newman governments and insisting that it was a purely “local” election.

None of the remaining 11 candidates gained from the widespread discontent. The vote for the Greens, who propped up the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments for six years, remained stagnant on 10.1 percent. Campaigning on a slogan of “transparency” in government, the Pirate Party polled fourth on 1.5 percent, followed by the protectionist Katter's

Australian Party and the conservative Family First Party, both on 1 percent.

The inability of these formations to make any impression points to a political impasse. Among masses of people there is growing opposition to the preparations for savage austerity measures in the May budget, the promotion of militarism and war, and the brutal treatment of refugees behind a veil of military secrecy. There is widespread hostility among young people in particular to the police-state mass surveillance exposed by former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden. But these concerns find no expression within the parliamentary framework.

Labor sought to make the by-election a “referendum” on the budget cuts being drafted by the Abbott government, and on those already imposed by the Newman state government, which has axed more than 14,000 public sector jobs. Opposition leader Shorten campaigned on the prospect of health and education services being slashed via the Abbott government’s commission of audit, as well as fears of a \$6 “co-payment” to see a doctor under the Medicare health scheme. He also criticised the government’s moves to end workers’ penalty rates, and raised the threat of mass layoffs at different firms including Ford, General Motors and SPC Ardmona.

Labor, however, has no credibility on any of these issues. The Rudd and Gillard governments backed major job destruction at BlueScope Steel, Qantas and throughout manufacturing. They restructured education and health care funding to drive down costs, and slashed government spending by record levels.

Labor’s candidate, Terri Butler, an industrial lawyer married to a trade union bureaucrat, vehemently defended Labor’s policies, particularly those of Rudd. Butler cynically claimed that the result sent a message to the Abbott and Newman governments that “you cannot cut your way to a better Australia.”

The only message that will be heeded by the government and Labor came in today’s editorial in Murdoch’s *Australian*. It insisted that both of the major parties had to do better in “selling” the “tough decisions” that must be imposed on the population to meet the “mammoth challenges facing the nation.” With the Abbott government “stumbling” in its public relations, the editorial demanded that Labor offer consensus for “essential reform”—welfare cutbacks,

slashing government spending and scrapping “heavily regulated workplaces.”

The editorial pointed to ongoing demands within ruling circles that the Abbott government moves more rapidly and decisively to enforce the “mammoth” social assault necessary to protect corporate profits and the interests of the ultra-wealthy as the global economic crisis intensifies.

Implementing this program will widen the already explosive gulf that exists between the entire political establishment and the needs and interests of the working class, the vast majority of the population.



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