

Australian Senate vote points to acute political disaffection

Mike Head
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A re-run election for federal Senate seats in Western Australia last Saturday saw the Labor Party's vote plummet to an historic low, even though the Abbott government's Liberal-National Coalition also suffered a major swing against it. A record level of voter abstention—nearly 30 percent—pointed to the deep underlying disaffection with the entire political establishment.

Labor's primary vote fell to 21.8 percent, nearly 5 percentage points less than it secured in last September's federal election. Just one in five voters cast a ballot for Labor, highlighting its reduction to minority status.

On the final day of the campaign, the lack of any real difference between the pro-business character of Labor and the Coalition was highlighted when it was revealed that Labor's number 1 candidate, trade union bureaucrat Joe Bullock, made a speech last November praising Tony Abbott as having "the potential to be a good prime minister."

Bullock declared that he knew Abbott's "core beliefs" because they worked closely together 30 years ago to take over the Sydney University Liberal Club. Bullock added to the damage to Labor's campaign by asserting that the party's members were "mad."

Far from being a "one-off" result, Saturday's vote result marks a deepening of the trend produced by intense hostility among working-class voters to Labor's record of enforcing mounting corporate job destruction in basic industries, including mining, and eroding healthcare, schools, universities and living conditions.

In Western Australia, formerly depicted as the "mining boom" state, thousands of layoffs in the mining areas have also exposed the fraud of the previous Labor government's claims that Australia was an exception to the world slump.

Labor's vote slumped even lower than in last month's Tasmanian state election—27 percent, the 2012 Queensland state election—26.6 percent—and the 2011 New South Wales state election—25.5 percent. It was well below the national vote of 33.8 percent that Labor received in last September's federal election, which was its worst national result since 1903.

Labor's heaviest losses occurred in two traditionally Labor-voting working class electorates south of the capital Perth. In Fremantle, its vote fell 7 percentage points to 25.8 percent, and in Brand by 5.8 points to 30.1.

At the same time, Saturday's results reflected emerging opposition to the Abbott government, which is intensifying the social assault that the Gillard and Rudd Labor governments launched. The Liberal vote dropped by 5.5 points to 33.7 percent, and its federal coalition partner, the Nationals, lost 2 points to 3.1 percent—a combined swing of 7.5 points against the government.

During the campaign, the Abbott government sought to downplay the savage spending cuts it is drawing up for next month's budget. But the state Liberal government gave some indication of what is to come. Last month, it slashed jobs and beds at two public hospitals in Perth, on top of earlier cuts to public school funding, including for hundreds of education assistants.

For now, the beneficiaries of the discontent are the Greens, who gained 6.4 points to a total of 15.9 percent, and mining magnate Clive Palmer's political vehicle, the Palmer United Party (PUP), which picked up 12.5 percent, a gain of 7.5 points.

After forming a coalition with Labor from 2010 to 2013, helping to police its pro-business offensive, the Greens appealed to voters concerned by the increasingly draconian measures against refugees, the

mass surveillance exposed by Edward Snowden, the development of coal seam gas mines and other environmental issues.

Palmer made a demagogic pitch to Western Australia's "states rights," declaring that with the PUP holding the balance of power in the Senate, the state's people would "reclaim" their "lost share" of Goods and Services Tax revenue, which he claimed was being siphoned off to the eastern states. He also backed the abolition of Labor's carbon pricing and mining tax, insisting that this would boost mining jobs. His \$5 million advertising blitz said absolutely nothing about his core "free-market" platform to drastically reduce corporate taxation.

An array of 27 other parties, plus some independents, stood in the election, but none garnered more than 2 percent of the vote. Instead, much of the popular disgust took a different form. Despite voting being compulsory—enrolled voters are fined for not casting a ballot—less than 70 percent of the state's 1.4 million enrolled voters did so.

The low turnout is unprecedented—a drop of 24 points from last September's 93 percent turnout, which was in line with the historic average. There was evident hostility to being forced to vote twice within six months—after about 1,400 votes went missing in a vote recount last year. But the mass abstention undeniably points to deep-going disgust with the entire political setup.

As a result of Saturday's vote, the Liberals will still obtain two of the six Senate seats being contested. Labor will get one, the Greens one and PUP one, with one seat to be decided by the distribution of preferences from other candidates. That final spot may not be determined for weeks.

The basic equation in the Senate remains unchanged by the sharp swings in Saturday's voting. Despite winning a landslide majority in the lower house, the House of Representatives, last September, the Abbott government failed to achieve a majority in the Senate, which can block legislation.

If Labor and the Greens vote together to oppose a bill, the government will have to rely on the support of Palmer's party, which now has three senators, plus an alliance with a fourth senator, from the obscure Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party.

This represents an ongoing parliamentary impasse.

The 2010 federal election resulted in the first "hung" parliament for 60 years, with neither Labor nor the Coalition holding a majority in the House of Representatives. The finally-completed 2013 poll has reproduced that impasse, in a different form, in the Senate, the upper house.

Labor's disastrous result is being used by the media establishment to insist that Labor must shift further to the right. Yesterday's *Australian* editorial declared: "Labor will be unelectable while it remains in denial about the budgetary mess it left, and wedded to big spending, big government and protectionism."

The truth is that after bailing out business, via stimulus packages, during the first stage of the global financial crash in 2008–09, Labor set about making the working class pay the price. It imposed the biggest government spending cut in post-war history during its final year in office. Now, however, the corporate elite is demanding much deeper structural cuts as the mining investment boom unravels and the world capitalist economy heads for further crises.

Former Labor minister Mark Bishop, an outgoing Western Australian senator, immediately gave an early indication of Labor's response, demanding that Labor drop its opposition to the abolition of the token mineral resource rent tax that the Gillard government negotiated with the big mining companies in 2010.

Twin editorials in today's *Australian* voiced renewed frustration that parliamentary democracy was failing to deliver parliamentary majorities to prosecute the corporate agenda. "That the fate of legislation crucial for the nation rests in such unpredictable and unimpressive hands is worrying," Murdoch's flagship declared.

For this situation, the newspaper blamed compulsory voting and proportional representation. It called for measures—such as higher nomination fees—to make it even harder for new parties to contest elections. This provides an insight into the deeply anti-democratic attitudes in ruling circles as they canvass means to suppress popular opposition.



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