

Australian politics in upheaval after election shock in Queensland

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2 February 2015

The ousting of the Queensland state Liberal National Party government after just one three-year term in office is the latest expression of the immense hostility and alienation of masses of people toward the entire political establishment and its austerity agenda. While no challenge has yet been mounted, the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Abbott—whose unpopularity is being blamed for the result—is being openly questioned in the ranks of his federal Liberal/National Party coalition and in the pages of the major newspapers.

A definite pattern has emerged in Australian political life. Elections, at both the federal and state level, have an entirely negative character, with the working class, in particular, going to the ballot box in order to repudiate the sitting government and its policies.

Three years ago, Anna Bligh's Queensland Labor government, which had rammed through the privatisation of state assets and spending cuts, suffered a devastating election defeat and was reduced to a rump of just seven seats in parliament. Now, it appears that Labor will be back in office, possibly as a minority government, after posturing, in a thoroughly hypocritical campaign, as the main opponent of privatisation.

Likewise in Victoria, a reviled Labor government was thrown out in 2010 only to be returned last November after the one-term Liberal government was ousted over its anti-working class policies.

In Queensland, voters sought not only to punish the state government of Premier Campbell Newman for sacking public servants and moving to privatise assets, but, as in Victoria, to signal their opposition to the policies of the federal Abbott government. Abbott's conservative coalition has only been in office for 17 months, since the defeat of the Gillard-Rudd minority Labor government in September 2013. It faces seething

hostility toward spending cuts to health and education that it sought to implement in its first budget last year, and, according to opinion polls, faces the prospect next year of being the first one-term federal government to be thrown out since the 1930s.

Abbott's personal disapproval rating is now plumbing the lows recorded by former Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard just before she was deposed by her predecessor Kevin Rudd. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull—whom Abbott successfully challenged for the Liberal leadership in 2009—have been named as potential replacements. In just the last 10 years, a total of ten national leaders of the two major parties have been ousted in inner-party coups or following election defeats.

For more than 30 years, successive Labor and Liberal governments have attacked the working class with economic and social restructuring in the interests of business “international competitiveness” and profitability. The demands for savage wage cuts and the dismantling of what remains of the social welfare state are intensifying amid the impact of the global economic slump and developing deflation. Growth in China, Australia's largest export market, is slowing markedly. Commodity prices for major exports such as iron ore, coal and gas have plummeted, slashing billions from the tax revenues of federal and state governments and blowing out their budget deficits. Investment into new mining projects has dried up, leading to tens of thousands of job losses. The Australian currency has plunged from \$US1.10 in 2011 down to 77 cents, heightening cost pressures on business.

The tremendous electoral volatility stems from the incompatibility of the agenda of the ruling elite with the interests of the millions of ordinary people. The

Queensland result, which saw the largest swings against a first-term government in Australian history, reflects the growing international outrage over the attempt by governments in every country to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of the working class.

The editorials and commentary in today's newspapers testify to the bewilderment and fear in ruling class circles over the resultant parliamentary impasse. Every government that seeks to meet the demands of the financial and corporate elite is threatened with defeat as soon as it has to face an election.

Paul Kelly, the editor-at-large of the *Australian*, wrote: "The dysfunctional crisis plaguing Australia's political system is deepening with the potential cost to the nation only becoming more severe."

The *Australian Financial Review* editorialised: "Australia's political system has lost the capacity to make the sort of difficult policy decisions required... The longer this continues, the more likely Australia will head down a Greece-lite path that will provoke, or exacerbate, the next crisis."

In a similar vein, the editorial of the *Australian* bemoaned that Queensland voters had not only destroyed the Newman government and potentially "sealed the fate of the Prime Minister," but "may have also destroyed any hope there is for a return to the era of reforming government that characterised the 1980s and 90s." It concluded that the "broader question for Australia's political parties is who can successfully design, communicate and implement policy change in the modern era"?

The most pressing issue is the crisis of political perspective and leadership in the working class. The electoral ousting of a pro-capitalist party and its replacement with another does not advance the interests of the working class one iota. The Labor Party is not a "lesser evil", but an apparatus that is committed to the same policies of war and austerity as the traditional conservative parties.

The political independence of the working class from all the parties of the ruling class is inseparable from winning the most politically-conscious sections of workers and youth to a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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