

The Abbott government and the deepening political crisis in Australia

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The leadership challenge yesterday to Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is one expression of the advanced political crisis being generated, not just in the ruling Liberal National coalition but the Australian political establishment as a whole, by the impact of the worsening global capitalist breakdown.

Just 17 months after defeating the previous Labor government, Abbott survived what he termed “a near death experience” by defeating a motion in the Liberal party room to declare all leadership positions open for contest. Some 40 percent of Liberal parliamentarians voted for the spill motion, even though there was no declared challenger, effectively putting Abbott on notice that he will be voted out as party leader, and thus prime minister, if the government’s fortunes do not improve.

The central issue is not Abbott’s leadership style or failure to communicate, as suggested by much of the media commentary. Rather the collapse of support for the Abbott government reflects the deep-going public resentment and hostility towards its attempts to ram through an austerity budget last May that included lifting the pension age to 70, far-reaching cutbacks to welfare benefits, a co-payment for doctors’ visits and higher university fees.

A vast chasm has opened up internationally between the savage austerity program being demanded by the corporate and financial elites and the social needs and aspirations of the broad majority of working people, who are expected to bear the full economic burden. Six years after the eruption of the global financial crisis, the deep assault on living standards has produced immense alienation from the traditional political parties and structures that have dominated the political landscape for decades. This is particularly clear in Greece, where support for the old political parties has collapsed, and a Syriza government brought to power, which, despite its left facade, is also committed to implementing austerity.

While the Australian economy was, for a period, partially insulated from the global economic breakdown, the collapse of the mining boom has produced a rapid economic reversal, undermined state and federal government revenues and fuelled ever-more insistent calls by big business for major inroads into living standards. But attempts to impose this regressive agenda have led to a series of electoral revolts.

Abbott won office in 2013 not as a result of his own popularity, but due to immense hostility towards the previous Labor government, its broken promises and austerity policies. In recent state elections, Liberal-National governments in Queensland and Victoria have been unceremoniously flung out of office, as their Labor predecessors were just one parliamentary term earlier. This unprecedented volatility is also reflected in the growing proportion of voters casting their ballots for independents, single-issue parties and right-wing populist formations, as a means of expressing their disgust with the entire political establishment.

The entire framework of parliamentary rule is collapsing amid deep frustration in ruling circles with the electoral process and the inability of elected governments to impose policies that are antithetical to the interests of the vast majority of voters. Writing in the *Australian* today, Abbott’s own chief economic adviser, Maurice Newman, declared that “Australia remains at a critical budget crossroads” and bemoaned the fact that after yesterday’s leadership challenge, “any early chance of fixing it seems to have all but evaporated... The clear message to the world is that Australia lacks the maturity and stamina to balance its budget.”

This is not a situation that the ruling classes, in Australia or internationally, can or will tolerate. In the past, the international media has paid scant attention to Australian political affairs, but the latest upheaval in Canberra is being closely watched. A great deal is at

stake, particularly for the US: since 2008, Australia has been the destination of substantial and growing American financial investments, as well as a critical component of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" directed against Beijing. Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in 2010 in an inner-party coup by Labor powerbrokers with close ties to the American embassy. Rudd's successors have fully integrated Australia into the Pentagon's war plans against China. The Abbott government has functioned as one of the most bellicose advocates of the US war drive, not only in Asia, but in Ukraine against Russia and in the Middle East.

The political impasse over the budget has fuelled open discussion in ruling circles about the need for new mechanisms to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis on the backs of the working class. An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week entitled "Wanted urgently: a new brand of politics" touted the establishment of "a new broad-based centrist party with economically and socially progressive ideals." Such a formation, which could embrace elements of the Liberal Party, Labor and the Greens, would perform a similar role to that of Syriza, using left-sounding rhetoric to mask an economically reactionary program. It would rest on the participation and backing of the various pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative that have enthusiastically hailed Syriza's victory.

A Syriza-style "centrist party" would, however, be an interim measure aimed at politically paralysing the working class by keeping it shackled to the parliamentary arena. "Left" bourgeois regimes like the Syriza government have historically functioned as ante-chambers to an open turn to dictatorial forms of rule. In Greece, the military, which ruled the country with an iron fist from 1967 to 1974, along with fascist parties such as Golden Dawn, are already waiting in the wings.

No one should assume that such methods will not be used in Australia. A comment in Murdoch's *Herald Sun* last Friday bluntly elaborated the case for autocratic forms of rule, declaring: "Massive electoral swings in Queensland and Victoria, plus leadership instability in Canberra, suggest democracy isn't working right now. It's time we temporarily suspended the democratic process and installed a benign dictatorship to make tough but necessary decisions."

These are not simply the musings of one isolated commentator. For more than a decade, successive governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have exploited the

"war on terror" to enact a series of anti-democratic laws that overturn long-standing legal rights. At the same time, the military has been systematically elevated to the very centre of domestic affairs, epitomised in the appointment of former military chief, General Peter Cosgrove, as governor-general, while huge sums of money are being spent to celebrate Australia's involvement in World War I, in order to glorify the military and revive the reactionary traditions of Australian militarism.

Just as the bourgeoisie is making plans to impose its agenda of war and austerity through extra-parliamentary means, so the working class must make its own political preparations to fight to defend its own independent class interests. At present, the hostility and alienation of broad layers of workers and youth remains trapped within the framework of parliamentary politics. Over the past years the voting out of one despised government has only resulted in its replacement with another, which invariably imposes the same savage, anti-working class policies.

The working class must begin to draw lessons from its experiences over the past several decades. It cannot defend its interests by trying to exert pressure on one parliamentary party or another. On the contrary, it is necessary to recognise that the root cause of the unending assault on living standards lies in the failure of the private profit system itself. Only by abolishing capitalism and replacing it with a planned world socialist economy can the economic and social interests of the vast majority be defended and advanced. That requires the construction of a new revolutionary leadership to fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class in Australia, in unity with its counterparts throughout the region and the world, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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