

Queensland Labor government destabilised by witch-hunt against indigenous MP

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After barely two months in office, the minority Labor government in the Australian state of Queensland has appealed to business leaders for support in a bid to survive a witch-hunt against an indigenous member of parliament over criminal convictions he incurred as a teenager and young man.

On Monday, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk forced the MP, Billy Gordon, to quit the Labor Party. As a result, her government now holds only 43 seats in the 89-electorate state parliament, two short of the 45 needed to survive.

The sudden eruption of the affair highlights the instability of the parliamentary system, not just in Queensland but across the country, because of the underlying working class hostility to both the major parties, Labor and Liberal-National.

Labor clawed its way back into office at the January 31 state election, just three years after being defeated in a landslide because of Labor's long record of privatisations and other pro-business measures. It won this year's election because of the intense antagonism toward the Liberal National Party (LNP) government of Premier Campbell Newman and the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, not because of any popular support for Labor.

For now, Palaszczuk retains the backing of parliamentary speaker Peter Wellington, an independent who struck an agreement with Labor following the January 31 election. The LNP has 42 seats and two are held by a right-wing rural-based party, Katter's Australian Party (KAP), with which Palaszczuk has been holding backroom talks over a possible deal to shore up her government.

Last weekend, both Palaszczuk and Wellington called on Gordon to resign from parliament over the supposedly previously undisclosed offences—dating

back to when he was 14 years old—and more recent domestic violence allegations, even though there is no legal requirement for him to quit.

Labor is calculating that it would win a by-election in Gordon's electorate of Cook, which covers the Cape York Peninsula and adjacent Torres Strait islands, which has the state's highest proportion of indigenous people. But Gordon has refused to resign, and his stand has been backed by nine Aboriginal mayors in the Cook electorate.

If Gordon continues to refuse to leave parliament, Labor could strike a pact with KAP, a nationalist and protectionist outfit, to stay in power. If Gordon resigns and the LNP wins the resulting by-election, the LNP could form a government in partnership with KAP.

Palaszczuk is openly seeking business backing to remain premier. "We're offering stable government right here right now," she declared on Monday. "From the breakfast this morning with the business community, they've said to me 'Anastacia, we like your style of government. We've never had this level of engagement.'"

Palaszczuk initially claimed to be morally outraged by media revelations that Gordon was convicted of several offences in the 1980s and 1990s, and faces domestic violence allegations. "I feel absolutely sick in the stomach, absolutely sick and disgusted," she said on Sunday. Palaszczuk declared: "I have always maintained integrity is fundamental to any government I lead. Today I am prepared to put my premiership on the line."

Yesterday, however, Palaszczuk shifted tack once opposition to the witch-hunt developed in Cook. Evidence also emerged that at least three LNP politicians, state and federal, were involved in leaking details of Gordon's past, including his juvenile

convictions—which are meant to be strictly confidential. Palaszcuk then accused the LNP of “gutter politics,” which she found “disgusting and deplorable.”

Parliamentary Speaker Wellington also dropped his insistence that Gordon resign from parliament, alleging that the LNP was orchestrating a “deliberate strategy” to destabilise and oust the government.

Palaszcuk’s responses involve rank hypocrisy on many levels. In the first place, Labor has used Gordon, a local indigenous official, to garner support among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voters. Before securing the state seat of Cook, he was a Labor candidate for the same region in the 2013 federal election.

Secondly, Palaszcuk’s office knew of the accusations against Gordon at least by March 13, but she delayed making them public until after her government relied on his vote to win a critical vote of confidence in state parliament on March 27.

Thirdly, while the *World Socialist Web Site* has no agreement whatsoever with Gordon’s politics, the domestic violence accusations against him remain unproven—no charges have even been laid—and his past record of breaking and entering and other minor offences is hardly unusual among indigenous people.

In fact, as Cape York Aboriginal people have commented, it would be difficult to find a local person who has not been subjected to police charges. For more than two centuries, indigenous people have faced systemic oppression and police victimisation. According to official statistics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up just 2 percent of Australia’s adult population, but 27 percent of the country’s prison inmates.

With Queensland’s parliament now adjourned until May 5, the future of Palaszcuk’s government may hang in the balance for weeks. But Labor’s reaction to the Gordon affair is entirely in keeping with its pro-business trajectory since it scraped back into office by feigning opposition to austerity and privatisation measures.

On her first full day in office, even before announcing her cabinet, Palaszcuk moved to win the favour of mining and other business leaders, and began preparations to impose deep cuts in social spending.

Labor convened a meeting in parliament house of almost 100 corporate executives with Palaszcuk and

Treasurer Curtis Pitt. “The doors are open, we want to talk to you and most fundamentally, we want to listen,” Palaszcuk said in her speech.

Representing the mining giants, Queensland Resources Council chief executive Michael Roche praised Labor’s “iron-clad” campaign commitment “not to increase royalties for coal, minerals, petroleum or gas.”

Palaszcuk’s second meeting was with trade union bosses, who heavily backed Labor’s election, to discuss how they would enforce her government’s plans against their members. Queensland Council of Unions president John Battams welcomed Palaszcuk’s order of priorities, telling the media: “The first day has seen meetings with business and meetings with unions, which is the way it should be.”

Several days later, Palaszcuk dropped the pretence of opposing privatisation, announcing that her government would sell off “non-strategic” assets, including public housing properties.

Within a month, Deputy Premier Jackie Trad foreshadowed budget cuts, saying Queenslanders were ready for a “mature conversation” about the state’s \$46 billion public debt. Treasurer Pitt then announced a Treasury “review” of the state’s finances, echoing the previous LNP government, which commissioned an “audit” report to try to justify sweeping public sector service and job cuts.

As the WSWs warned before the January 31 election, whether Labor or the LNP formed government, it would only deepen the social assault conducted by the Newman government, under conditions of collapsing mining prices, rising unemployment and falling tax revenues.



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