

Australian by-election becomes test of Abbott's leadership

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Under intense pressure from the corporate establishment over his failure to impose sufficiently savage austerity measures, Prime Minister Tony Abbott faces the prospect of removal if his Liberal-National Coalition government polls badly in a federal by-election, to be held in the Western Australian electorate of Canning on September 19.

The by-election is being held amid plummeting share prices and a rout of mining commodity export prices, reflecting the deepening impact of China's slowdown and the global slump that began with the financial crash of 2008.

This crisis is further intensifying the demands of big business for the government to move aggressively to override the widespread public hostility that has produced a parliamentary impasse on many of its measures to slash social spending and attack workers' conditions.

Commentary in the mainstream media over the past week has suggested that Abbott will be ousted if the Coalition loses the seat of Canning, which it held by a near-12 percent margin in the 2013 general election, or even suffers a substantial swing.

Abbott barely survived a Liberal Party leadership challenge in February. Ironically, Don Randall, the Liberal member of parliament whose death from a heart attack on July 21 precipitated the by-election, was a co-sponsor of the motion to sack Abbott, reportedly because voter sentiment in Canning had moved so sharply against the government.

A Murdoch media poll in Canning last week pointed to a 10 percent drop in support for the government. If replicated on September 19, that result "would guarantee Abbott's demise," according to the *Australian's* contributing editor Peter van Onselen, who has many Liberal Party connections.

"Tony Abbott's leadership is under siege," Van Onselen observed last Saturday. "His judgment is being

questioned, including by colleagues... It is the most important by-election in federal political history because a prime minister's fate rests on the result."

Unnamed senior Liberals have told Fairfax Media outlets that Abbott's leadership will be "all over" if the Coalition loses the seat, which lies on the southern suburban and semi-rural fringes of Perth, the state capital.

The Liberal Party last week selected as its candidate Andrew Hastie, an ex-SAS officer. It is an indication that the government will increasingly resort to militarism, anti-Islamic "terrorist" scare campaigns and anti-refugee witch-hunting to divert from its intense economic and political problems. A career soldier, Hastie commanded front-line troops in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and later became an adviser to Operation Sovereign Borders, the military mobilisation to repel asylum seekers' boats.

Soaring unemployment in Western Australia, and Canning in particular, is a sharp expression of the reversal overtaking Australian capitalism, bound up with the collapse of the protracted "mining boom." Having once enjoyed mega-profits, the mining giants have eliminated thousands of jobs, and thousands more have been destroyed in related industries.

Since 2006, at the height of the boom, Western Australia's official unemployment rate has more than doubled, from a low of 2.9 percent to 6.4 percent in July 2015. Even on these greatly understated official figures, the Mandurah region, which covers Canning, now has the highest jobless rate in the state—10.8 percent, or more than double the inner Perth rate of 5 percent.

For young people, the situation is even more devastating. A report released in February 2014 said the Mandurah region was one of Australia's 10 "hotspots" for the most out-of-work youth. Among 15- to 24-year-olds, the official rate was near 20 percent, well above the national average of 12.2 percent.

This social crisis has erupted partly because Mandurah is home to an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 “fly-in, fly-out” mine workers, who used to supply much of the labour power from which massive profits were extracted. Several mining projects also lie within two hours’ drive from Mandurah, the state’s second largest city. They include bauxite mining and alumina refining at Pinjarra and Wagerup, and the Boddington Gold Mine.

A recent Roman Catholic report on social disadvantage, *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, listed the Mandurah local government area as one of the most affected in the country. On one measure of disadvantage—the number of young people receiving government rent assistance—Mandurah ranked the highest in Western Australia.

In an attempt to divert from this economic and social disaster, the Abbott government has selected a candidate in line with its efforts to drum up a war atmosphere, including by preparing to order air force fighter jets, currently involved in the US-led war in Iraq, to extend their missions into Syria.

This extension would mean Australia publicly joining the illegal Washington-orchestrated drive to oust the Assad regime in Syria, adding to the long list of crimes committed by successive Australian governments as part of predatory American operations in the Middle East, starting with the bombardment of Iraq in the 1990–91 Gulf War.

Over the weekend, Abbott vehemently defended Hastie, the Liberal Party candidate, after newspapers reported that the recently-resigned SAS captain commanded a unit whose soldiers faced a military investigation for allegedly chopping off the hands of three people—labeled “Taliban fighters”—they killed in Afghanistan in 2013. Mutilation of corpses is a serious war crime under international and Australian law.

Even though a member of Hastie’s unit is still under investigation, Abbott declared that he was aware of the matter and “there was no blemish, no stain on the conduct of this exemplary officer.”

Significantly, Hastie, who said he was orbiting overhead in a helicopter during the incident, declared that the soldiers were following official instructions. “I can say with great confidence that those soldiers involved directly with the incident were acting in what they believed to be the appropriate process laid out by Defence.”

In fact, Hastie criticised the military for continuing the investigation into the mutilations, claiming that the chopping off of hands arose because “it is critical when

you are fighting the Taliban that you gather evidence and do what you can to investigate the precise identification of your enemy.”

Both Liberal-National and Labor governments have deployed the SAS and other Australian special forces as assassination squads, killing or capturing alleged insurgent leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq. SAS units have been accused of committing war crimes, including massacring families during night-time raids.

Last Saturday, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten effectively joined Abbott in springing to Hastie’s defence, saying: “I respect the work of the defence forces, I respect the work that they’ve done overseas.”

Throughout the corporate media, including the state-run Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Hastie, 32, has been depicted as a “star candidate,” precisely because he spent his entire adult life as a soldier, culminating as a SAS commander.

The *West Australian* newspaper reported that in his pre-selection application to the Liberal Party, Hastie declared that his military service would be directly relevant to overcoming Australia’s political crisis, which he associated with “big spending” by governments and a threat to “Western cultural values”—a clear reference to Islam.

“As an SAS officer with active service experience, I have demonstrated a capacity to fight for the Australian way of life,” he wrote. “Our nation is at a critical point in history... Australian and Western cultural values are under threat and future generations of Western Australians will inherit a tax burden to subsidise the big spending of the previous Labor government.”

This chilling message, suggesting that military experience should be brought to bear in overcoming popular opposition to austerity measures, reflects the mounting demands of the financial elite for urgent action to impose the burden of the economic breakdown on the working class.



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