

New Turnbull government suffers loss of support in Australian by-election

Our correspondents
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Five days after the governing Liberal Party ousted its leader Tony Abbott and installed Malcolm Turnbull as Australia's fifth prime minister in five years, voters in the Western Australian electorate of Canning went to polling booths on Saturday to elect a new local member. The former longstanding member, Liberal's Don Randall, died in July.

The result underscores the popular political hostility toward the Liberal-National Coalition government's anti-working class policies. The Liberal candidate, former Army special forces captain Andrew Hastie, was elected in what was considered a safe Liberal seat. He suffered a 4-percentage point loss of support, from 51 to 47 percent, requiring a distribution of preferences from other candidates.

The main opposition Labor Party's vote rose by about 9 percent, largely at the expense of the Liberals and the right-wing populist Palmer United Party of mining magnate Clive Palmer, whose vote fell 4 points, and the Greens, whose vote dropped 1.5 points. After the distribution of preferences, the Liberals' margin over Labor fell by a total of 6.4 percent.

If that swing were replicated nationally, the Liberal-National Coalition, which only took office in September 2013, would enter history as the first government since 1930 to be defeated after just one term.

A poor vote for the government was touted as the likely trigger for a challenge against Abbott. Instead, Turnbull and the cabal backing him moved before the by-election. Turnbull supporters claim the result in Canning would have been worse if Abbott had remained as prime minister. A national election is due within 12 months.

Behind the political instability and electoral volatility that characterises official Australian politics lies the

alienation of the majority of the population, especially in major working class areas, from the entire political establishment.

The concerns of workers and their families centre on the impact of decades of cutbacks to public health, education and other essential social infrastructure, and cuts to social welfare such as the aged pension and family support. In Western Australia, where a protracted boom in mining investment and exports to China is collapsing, many workers are deeply worried about the future of their jobs and demands by employers for cuts to wages and conditions.

Both the Liberal and Labor parties sought to divert social tensions in reactionary directions. Hastie centred his campaign on a law-and-order pledge to push for mandatory prison sentences for those convicted of trafficking the methamphetamine "ice."

The Liberals also traded on Hastie's military record in Afghanistan, where the US and NATO occupation force utilised the Australian Special Air Service (SAS) to conduct targeted killings or kidnappings of alleged insurgents.

The Labor Party, backed by the trade unions, sought to whip up fears about jobs being taken by foreign workers on "457" visas or by Chinese workers brought in under the terms of the China-Australia free trade agreement.

A WSWs reporting team spoke to voters at a polling booth at Byford, south of Armadale. The electorate of Canning takes in suburban and semi-rural areas on the southern fringes of Perth, the Western Australian capital. Numbers of "fly-in, fly-out" (FIFO) workers, who were employed in mining-related construction, maintenance and operations in remote parts of the state, have bought homes in the electorate. Even during the "mining boom," the area had youth unemployment as

high as 20 percent.

Turnbull, a former merchant banker and the wealthiest-ever prime minister, is viewed with deep suspicion.

Samantha, a young mother of two boys, said Turnbull was “a wolf in sheep’s clothing,” behind his claims to be a more “compassionate” leader. “He will try to do what Abbott couldn’t,” she said, and “put up the GST (consumption tax).”

“They’re trying to force single mums back into work, they’re trying to force [unemployed] people on the dole into work, but there are not enough jobs. They’re doing that to cut penalty rates and wages. Austerity doesn’t work. Look at Greece. You can’t revive an economy when people don’t have any money.”

Samantha explained: “I can only just pay my bills. I’m just lucky my husband has a good job and a good boss. I don’t think Labor is an alternative, but it is the only one we’ve got.”

Anna, a young woman, related that while her husband Jeff currently had a FIFO job, working a seven-day shift in a gold mine and then spending a week at home, “a lot of workers are losing their jobs” as investment in mining projects plummets.

“A lot of people have copped it quite bad,” she said. “You used to be able to move from one project to the next. Now, people have to take 5 to 10 percent wage cuts and they are losing bonuses they used to get. There is a lot more competition for what jobs there are. Plus, the government has cut tax benefits for FIFO and is cutting family tax benefits. People are getting caught out with their mortgages. We’re worried.”

Anna commented: “There’s no point in voting, because we don’t decide anything. They put in whom they want. Politics is just about business, not the normal people.”

Another young worker, who is only home for 9 days, then works 26 days on an iron ore project in the Pilbara, more than 1,500 kilometres north of Perth, said: “Jobs are going everywhere. I don’t know how long I’ll last.”

Tammie, a student, said she “expects an economic crash or crisis sometime in the next year.” She added: “There is a lot of poverty and homelessness that people don’t know about. People don’t look at what is happening in the rural areas, especially for the Aboriginal communities.” Students she knew could not

access adequate mental health services for depression and were “relying on university counsellors.”

Greg, a retiree who votes Liberal, explained that his main concern was the treatment by both parties of retired workers on the old age pension. “They seem to penalise the people who worked all their lives, rather than target the wealthy people who have done well for themselves and who are taxed less,” he said. “It annoys me that they always attack the working class and the retired, rather than looking at the superannuation policies [which favour high-income recipients].”

Greg continued: “It is probably going to be even more so, now that Turnbull is in. He is an ex-finance man in Goldman Sachs. I was reading a profile on just the real estate he owns. Most of them [politicians] have got a lot of wealth behind them.”

His wife Beryl, who was born in Britain, pointed to the poverty wages paid to even skilled workers in that country as an example of what was being sought in Australia. She said a member of her family who visited recently is employed as a special needs teacher and is “paid only £9,000 [a year]... You can’t live decently on that.”



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