

Australia: “Q&A” segment reveals a yawning social divide

**Mike Head—Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland
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The arrogance and indifference of the political and media establishment toward the worsening social conditions confronting the vast majority of ordinary working people were on full display during Monday night’s “Q&A” program on ABC television, broadcast from Brisbane, the Queensland state capital.

Despite the audience being carefully selected, and their questions closely vetted by the government-funded broadcaster, a range of questions put to the panel indicated the mounting outrage over the unemployment, falling wages, insecure employment, soaring housing costs and deteriorating social services facing millions of workers and young people.

The response of the panel—candidates in the July 2 election representing the Liberal-National Coalition government, the Labor Party and the Greens as well as two “independents”—was a mixture of condescension, scorn and lies.

Speaking for the government, Trade Minister Steven Ciobo was the most openly contemptuous. He declared that the two “major” parties—the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor—continued to dominate the political system because people were doing so well. “We’re a country that has frankly, in global terms, one of the highest standards of living in the world,” he claimed, and called for a “reality check.”

Likewise, Labor MP Terri Butler insisted that the only “choice” in the election was between the “majors”—the government and Labor. “I want to be part of a government that’s got a positive plan for all of those things,” she said. In reality, having formed governments for decades, Labor is directly responsible for the deteriorating social conditions.

The chasm between the working class and the political elite, however, quickly became evident from the audience questions.

Rick Joseph explained that he came from a public housing background and asked the panel members: “What will be done to help the working poor of this country?” After listening to obfuscation from all five panelists, he spoke again with some vehemence.

Joseph said he was “trying to give my son the education that he deserves. You guys forced me to look at alternative education sources because the public system just doesn’t give him what he needs.” Joseph added: “You force me to spend three hours in traffic getting to work every day because the infrastructure that should be there just isn’t there. You force me to pay more for rent every week than I need to because housing affordability is just terrible. You force my wife not to work as much as she should because childcare is too expensive. I’m trying to break that cycle but there’s just blocks everywhere... why can’t you guys just do something about that?”

These remarks won applause and “Q&A” moderator Tony Jones quickly shut down any further discussion. “I’m going to take that as a comment because we’ve got so many questions,” he announced. “It’s a very passionate comment and I think it’s quite a good place to leave that subject.”

But the next question was just as revealing. David Carter condemned the proposed reduction of wage penalty rates for workers, like himself, who work on Sundays. He said: “I’ve worked as a chef for over 17 years. The Productivity Commission recommended a cut in Sunday penalty rates for people like me in the hospitality industry, but hospitality workers are some of the lowest paid workers in Australia.”

Later, Nathan Scholz challenged Ciobo to explain how the government’s planned company tax cuts would “trickle down” to benefit the population, when people would have to pay upfront fees to see doctors.

“My wife and I own a small business, a coffee shop here in Brisbane,” Scholz said. “The proposed corporate tax cut means we will get an extra \$8 a week next year. Given it means everyone in this room, including potential customers, will have to pay more for them and their families to go to the GP, couldn’t we cut out the middleman? You keep the \$8 and protect [Medicare] bulk billing so my customers will have more money to spend in my shop?”

Another audience member, Kristy Harling, pointed to the loss of 21,000 jobs in central Queensland’s mining towns, such as Emerald, Blackwater and Moranbah. “It breaks my heart, to see local families struggling to put food on the table and to see hundreds of houses empty because of foreclosure with no one to fill them,” she said. “With all of this talk of ‘jobs and growth,’ what are your plans for the next industry in central Queensland, to ensure it is not left littered with ghost towns?”

Not one member of the panel provided any answers to these questions. This included Greens leader Richard Di Natale, who was intent instead on underscoring his party’s desire to stabilise the parliamentary order. He offered to support a Labor government, as the Greens did from 2010 to 2013. It was “a productive period of government,” he proclaimed, with “the Greens playing a constructive role.”

The title of the program was “Balance of Power,” reflecting the fear in ruling circles that, due to the rising discontent, the election will result in a “hung parliament,” with no party holding a majority. Because of that concern, the panel featured two heavily-promoted “independents”—senators Nick Xenophon and Jacqui Lambie. They and other “third parties” are scrambling, in various ways, to channel the disaffection back into the hands of the political and corporate establishment.

With the economic situation in Australia and globally rapidly deteriorating, whatever promises any of these formations make will be ditched as soon as the election is out of the way. The contempt for working people on show on “Q&A” speaks volumes about what lies ahead.

There is only one party in the election—the Socialist Equality Party—giving a voice to the working class and telling the truth: the capitalist profit system itself is the cause of exploitation, social inequality and war.

All the resources exist to provide first-class healthcare, education, housing and social infrastructure for all, in Australia and worldwide. But this vast social wealth, generated by the collective labour of workers everywhere, must be freed from the grip of the major banks, corporations and the rich. Economic life must be reorganised, from top to bottom, along genuinely socialist lines, to provide for social need, not private profit.



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