

# Australia's Nick Xenophon: An “anti-politician” with a nationalist and militarist program

Mike Head—SEP candidate for the Senate in Queensland  
4 June 2016

A group led by South Australian “independent” senator Nick Xenophon is currently the most high-profile of the “third parties” in the campaign for the July 2 double dissolution federal election. All of them are hoping to exploit public hostility toward both the Liberal-National Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party, as well as growing distrust in the Greens.

By presenting himself as an “anti-politician,” Xenophon picked up almost 25 percent of the vote for the Senate in South Australia at the last federal election in 2013. This year, his recently-formed Nick Xenophon Team (NXT), is reportedly planning to run for the Senate in every state and in 18 lower house seats.

Like other such candidates, Xenophon is trying to channel the widespread social discontent being produced by massive job losses, declining wages and conditions and the slashing of social services back into the dead-end of the parliamentary system on the basis of nationalism and militarism. Above all, NXT is seeking to head off a movement of the working class against the corporate elite.

Given the disintegration of support for the two main ruling parties, NXT could hold the “balance of power” in the next parliament—meaning that whichever party forms government could depend on its votes in the Senate, or even the House of Representatives. In the event of another “hung parliament,” with no party holding a majority in the lower house, NXT could even become a coalition partner in either a Liberal-National- or Labor-led government.

According to media polling, NXT might win three or four Senate seats in South Australia and perhaps a Senate seat in some other states. Because this is a rare double dissolution election, with all 12 senators, rather than half, to be elected in each state, each seat can be won with just 7.7 percent of the statewide vote.

Despite nearly 20 years in the South Australian parliament and the federal Senate, Xenophon still portrays himself as a critic of the political establishment. A former suburban lawyer, he was originally elected at the state level in 1997 as a single-issue candidate, opposing poker machines and online gambling.

Over time, he positioned himself as a man of the so-called “common sense” middle, attempting to draw on the disaffection from both the Coalition and Labor, particularly in South Australia, where the closure of car plants and other basic industries and the collapse of the mining boom has produced the highest jobless rate in the country.

What is less understood is that his policies, as well as being unashamedly parochial, are virulently nationalist and militarist. Xenophon has been one of the most zealous advocates of assembling Australia’s planned new fleet of 12 submarines in the South Australian capital of Adelaide, not just because the \$50 billion project would supposedly generate local employment, but also to assist the US to confront China.

Last October, Xenophon wrote a column in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, the city’s Murdoch tabloid, insisting that any reduction in the proposed number of subs would “compromise our national security in an increasingly volatile region.” He declared the need to prepare for war, saying:

“In wartime, simply sending subs to sea causes chaos for our enemies. Not knowing where our subs are means our enemies have to assume they’re everywhere, stretching and weakening the enemy’s forces. Submarines can secretly insert Special Forces troops and take them out again, covertly lay sea mines in and around enemy ports, and launch surprise attacks.”

Xenophon provided a list of incidents “in our region” that had the potential to ignite conflict. It included “a North Korean submarine sank a South Korean navy ship; Japan and China are facing off over disputed islands; China declared an Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea; and China has had a naval stand-off with Vietnam over oil drilling rights.”

Then Xenophon turned to the “ongoing tension between China and the US over Chinese man-made islands in the South China Sea.” He emphasised that the US government had asked Australia to “assist the US navy with patrols in the South China Sea”—that is, to join the provocations against China by staging supposed “freedom of navigation” incursions into Chinese-claimed territorial waters. “This would be a big step and makes one thing clear: we have to be able to deploy with our allies far from Australia. To do that, we can’t have a ‘part-time’

submarine force.”

Earlier this year, Xenophon joined the clamour against the leasing of Darwin’s civilian port to a Chinese company, echoing objections by US President Barack Obama. “I can’t believe Defence, and even ASIO [the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation], waved this through,” Xenophon told journalists.

Xenophon has tried to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment over the sale of Australian land to Chinese companies. In February, he described Treasurer Scott Morrison’s decision to approve the sale of Van Diemen’s Land dairy in Tasmania to a Chinese company as “wrong, wrong, wrong.” In April, Xenophon declared that the proposed sale of Australia’s biggest cattle station to a Chinese firm was “an election battle line.” He said his potential support for one of the major parties to form the next government could “absolutely” be contingent on blocking the deal. Morrison subsequently banned the sale under foreign investment laws.

Xenophon opposed last year’s Australia-China Free Trade Agreement, aligning with the nationalist and chauvinist objections raised by the trade union movement. He also criticised Australia’s illegal bugging of East Timor’s government during negotiations over the lucrative Timor Sea oil and gas fields, warning that Canberra’s attitude toward East Timor could push the tiny country into the arms of China. “In recent years, China has built East Timor’s presidential palace, its foreign ministry buildings and its army barracks,” Xenophon wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last August.

This East Timor concern also illustrates the national-based business constituency on which Xenophon rests. NXT’s main corporate backer is wealthy spectacles retailer Ian Melrose, who donated \$175,000 to help launch Xenophon’s party in December 2014. Melrose, who sponsored advertisements opposing Australia’s bullying of East Timor, also ran ads condemning a Defence Department decision to award his competitor, multinational Specsavers, a \$33.5 million contract.

In the past, Xenophon condemned corporate political donations, declaring that a political party would be “owned” by a donor that contributed more than \$100,000 to a campaign. When the Melrose donation came to public attention last month, Xenophon changed his tune, saying he had been “too clever by half” to oppose such donations.

Likewise, reflecting definite business interests, Xenophon previously called for the cutting of penalty wage rates for working on Sundays, saying they were “killing small business.” He supports the Coalition government’s promised corporate tax cuts, at least for companies turning over up to \$10 million a year, and opposes any reduction in “negative gearing” tax subsidies for landlords.

Behind Xenophon’s sometimes progressive social façade—he claims to oppose cuts to education, foreign aid and pensions—NXT backs measures that overturn basic legal and democratic rights. It supports the bipartisan “offshore

processing regime” that incarcerates refugees on remote islands and calls for the government to “lock away” terrorists and “extremists.”

Xenophon dresses up his nationalist program with references to defending “Australian jobs,” but this only serves to tie workers to the profit requirements of national employers, and pit them against their fellow workers in China, across the Asia Pacific and internationally. In response to the imminent closure of the General Motors car plant in Adelaide and the destruction of hundreds more jobs from the Arrium steelworks and iron ore mine near Whyalla, west of Adelaide, Xenophon calls for government and military procurement programs to favour national-based companies and for stronger “anti-dumping” laws to block imports, especially from China.

In its election statement, the Socialist Equality Party urges workers and youth not to be fooled by formations like NXT. Instead, they should draw conclusions from the role already played by outfits such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and mining magnate Clive Palmer’s Palmer United Party. “Far from opposing the agenda of austerity and war, they serve as agents of the corporate elite, no less than the major parties. They all promote nationalism, defend Australian capitalism and act to protect it against its international rivals and against the working class at home.” That is precisely the aim of Xenophon’s NXT.

*To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.*

*Authorised by James Cogan, Shop 6, 212 South Terrace, Bankstown Plaza, Bankstown, NSW 2200.*



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**