

Australia: Deepening social discontent produces post-election turmoil

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5 July 2016

Anger over job losses and declining living conditions, combined with years of bitter political experiences with both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments, were the primary factors in the further collapse of support for the major parties in last Saturday's Australian election.

With 1.5 million postal votes still to be counted, some of which will not arrive until July 15, it may be another 10 days before the outcome of the election is known. At least 13 seats in the 150-member lower house remain in doubt, leaving both parties well short of the required majority of 76 seats.

The most likely result is a hung parliament, only the third in Australia's history, with the formation of a government dependent on deals struck with other parties and "independents." Before the election, the Coalition government held 90 seats, due to its sweeping defeat of the Greens-backed Labor government in the 2013 election.

The deepening impact of the global economic crisis that erupted in 2008 has intensified the protracted breakup of the two-party system over the past three decades. Since 2007, in particular, voters have experienced six years of Labor government, supported by the Greens, and three years of Coalition government; both seeking to slash social spending to impose the burden of the global breakdown.

The most pronounced expression of the continuing haemorrhaging of support for the political establishment, including the Greens, came in the upper house, the Senate, where a record 26 percent of the valid votes went to other groups, mostly right-wing populists who postured as opponents of the major parties.

There was a 2-percentage point swing against the ruling Coalition, taking its vote down to around 35 percent, but Labor picked up only a 1-point swing to about 30 percent, and the Greens' vote fell 0.35 points, losing at least one of their nine Senate seats as a result. Today's 26 percent vote for "others" stands as another marker in the historic decline in support for the major parties. It stands in sharp contrast to the 4.25 percent recorded in 1990.

For now, the main beneficiaries were predominantly

nationalist formations trying to channel the social and political discontent in protectionist and xenophobic directions, pitting Australian workers against their fellow workers internationally. Despite the disintegration of mining magnate Clive Palmer's Palmer United Party (PUP), which secured 5.5 percent of the vote at the last federal election in 2013 with similar anti-establishment rhetoric, the vote for such parties grew.

Most prominently, Pauline Hanson's right-wing, anti-immigrant One Nation obtained 4 percent, including nearly 10 percent in the mining state of Queensland. The Nick Xenophon Team, which pushes for protectionism and military spending, is based in South Australia, where the closure of the car industry is compounding the mining bust, secured 3.4 percent. Hanson and Xenophon could hold up to three seats each in the 76-member Senate.

In the House of Representatives, the largest shifts against Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government came in areas of the country most devastated by the collapse of the country's mining boom, the closure of auto and other manufacturing industries and soaring housing prices, which have taken home ownership out of the reach of many young working class people.

On average, the Coalition vote fell 3.68 percentage points to 41.8 percent, but its losses were considerably greater in the regions where the social reality was most starkly divorced from Turnbull's constant refrain that Australians live in "exciting" times of "transition" to a new economy.

In northern and central Queensland, where thousands of jobs have been eliminated in coal mines and the Townsville nickel refinery, the anti-government swings exceeded 6 points. In electorates around the north and south of Brisbane, the state capital, where official unemployment rates are as high as 20 percent, the government's vote fell by up to 8.5 points.

Across the western and southwestern suburbs of Sydney, where exorbitant house prices are hitting families facing high unemployment and under-employment rates, the anti-government swing reached as high as 9.3 percent, allowing

Labor to regain several seats it lost in 2013.

In Tasmania, which has the second highest unemployment rate in the country, the government's vote dropped by up to 10.8 percent, and it lost all three seats it held in the island state to Labor. Ex-PUP Senator Jacqui Lambie kept her Senate seat with a vote of 8.5 percent.

Across South Australia, where workers have been hit by closures of mines and auto-related plants, anti-government swings of around 8 percent opened the way for Xenophon's group to pick up one or possibly two seats, as well as two or three Senate seats.

In Western Australia, where iron ore and other mine closures have eliminated thousands of jobs, the government lost more than 5 percentage points, with the largest swings in outer Perth suburbs.

While Labor has gained a number of seats, these were mainly ones it lost in the 2013 landslide, taking it back to near the total it obtained in the 2010 election, after which it formed a minority government with the Greens.

To gain votes, Labor conducted a desperate last-minute "save Medicare" campaign, falsely claiming it would defend the public health system, even as it repudiated previous promises to oppose social spending cuts worth \$40 billion over four years, plus a \$57 billion cut to public hospitals over the next decade.

Despite the cynical Medicare claims, Labor won only about a half of the lower house votes lost by the government, leaving it with Labor's second lowest primary vote in a century.

In the lower house, the Greens' vote increased marginally by just over 1 percent to 9.9 percent, but that remained well down from their peak of 11.8 percent in 2010, before they entered into a formal agreement to prop up the minority Labor government. That government, led by Julia Gillard, not only committed Australia to the US military "pivot" to Asia against China, including the basing of US marines in Darwin, but cut public spending by the greatest amount in history in 2012–13.

During this election, the Greens wanted to further cement their position in the political establishment, seeking ministerial posts in a Labor-led government and pledging to help stabilise the parliamentary set-up. Reflecting their upper-middle class and pro-business constituency, they concentrated their campaigns on largely gentrified and wealthy electorates.

For example, the Greens obtained 43 percent of the vote in inner Melbourne, 25 percent in Higgins, a well-to-do electorate held by the Coalition, and 19 percent in Kooyong, based on Melbourne's richest neighbourhoods. In the now largely better-off electorates of Batman and Wills, they picked up 37 and 30.5 percent respectively. Likewise, the

Greens polled 22 percent in Grayndler in inner Sydney, and nearly 20 percent in inner Brisbane, as well as 20 percent in the northern New South Wales rural electorate of Richmond, which includes the wealthy enclave of Byron Bay. By contrast, their vote in working class areas was generally less than 5 percent.

Hanson's One Nation consciously targeted some of the most economically and socially devastated regions. Its vote exceeded 15 percent in central Queensland and outlying areas of Brisbane, where mining-related job losses have created virtual ghost towns and areas of deep poverty. It also picked up 8 percent in the western Brisbane electorate of Oxley, which has high levels of unemployment.

Hanson last won such levels of support during the late 1990s, when she gained from the landslide defeat of the Hawke and Keating-led Labor government of 1983-1996 that ruthlessly enforced the restructuring of the economy to satisfy the needs of global capital.

Hanson's ability to make a political comeback, preying upon the social distress being suffered by broad layers of working people, is entirely bound up with the fact that the working class has been politically suppressed and straitjacketed for decades by the Labor Party and trade union apparatuses. They have enforced the ongoing destruction of jobs and conditions under the demand of making Australian-based employers competitive on the world market, peddling a nationalist line that dovetails with Hanson's.

The re-emergence of Hanson, along with Xenophon, Lambie and similar "other" parties, who all defend the profit system, which is the ultimate cause of war, exploitation and social inequality, is a warning sign. It reinforces the need for workers and young people to turn to the genuine socialist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, to completely reorganise economic life to meet human need, not the insatiable profit appetites of the wealthy elite.



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