

Australia: Political instability deepens as Liberal Party faces potential split

Linda Tenenbaum
29 December 2016

On December 22, the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch's national flagship, reported: "Fears are mounting within the Liberal Party that maverick South Australian senator Cory Bernardi is set to split from the Coalition to spearhead the new Australian Conservatives party, with an announcement expected in the new year.

"The conservative firebrand and his 'very close friend' Gina Rinehart met key members of US president-elect Donald Trump's campaign team, including former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani and campaign manager Kellyanne Conway, in Washington last month, fuelling fears the senator might have the support of Australia's richest woman to bankroll the party and dilute the Liberals' support base."

Bernardi, who was thrown off the Liberal Party's frontbench for linking gay marriage with polygamy and bestiality, first mooted a far-right breakaway party in the immediate aftermath of the July 2 federal election, which saw the Liberal-National Coalition government scrape into office with a mere one-seat majority.

The election brought to the surface the extent of seething political discontent among wide layers of the population towards ever-widening social inequality, unemployment, the casualisation of former full-time jobs, and the unrelenting, three-decades-long assault on social rights, especially public education, health and pensions. The establishment parties, Liberal, National, Labor and Greens, together won just 75 percent of the vote, their lowest combined result since the Second World War. In the absence of any alternative program or perspective from Labor, the Greens or the trade unions, a series of right-wing populist parties and individuals was able to capitalise on this mass disaffection, winning a total of 11 "cross-bench" Senate seats. Not one of them offered any solution to the social crisis. Instead, they sought to channel the growing popular hostility and outrage in a nationalist, xenophobic and chauvinist direction.

Bernardi responded to the election result by calling it a "disaster," and accusing Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of driving away the party's "base." "You're

seeing a whole bunch of conservative votes splinter off into other parties," he said. "I want to make sure that people who have a conservative disposition are adequately represented in the public square." Bernardi insisted that the task was now to unite "Australian Conservatives ... regardless of their party affiliation," and that Pauline Hanson, leader of the anti-immigrant One Nation party, which won four Senate seats, should not be "dismissed."

Yesterday, Murdoch columnist Miranda Devine revealed that, in an interview on 2GB radio, Hanson had told her that she was willing to "join forces" with Bernardi, and would even allow him to "take over [One Nation] rather than forming another party, which would only split the conservative vote." Devine characterised Hanson's offer as a "stunning proposal that would send shockwaves through the Coalition" and concluded that Bernardi would be "unlikely to rebuff Hanson's offer to solidify conservative support for them both..."

Having won four federal Senate seats, Hanson's One Nation is preparing to stand scores of candidates in the next state elections in Queensland and Western Australia. Recent polls indicate that she has up to 30 percent support in major working class suburbs of Queensland, and a Galaxy poll recorded 16 per cent support across that state.

Bernardi and Hanson share a common platform, which has strong similarities with that of US President-elect Trump, the UKIP party in Britain, the AfD in Germany and Marine Le Pen in France: economic nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, militarism and war. Their new-found prominence (in the case of Hanson, after being sidelined for nearly 18 years), is due to factors similar to those that have elevated their counterparts in Europe and the US. It is symptomatic of the depth of the economic, political and social malaise throughout the country.

They target the most economically devastated areas, where recent studies have revealed some 6.6 million people now live in conditions of actual recession, centred in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. They utilise demagogic rhetoric to vilify all Muslims as responsible for

“Islamic terrorism” and call for their deportation, and blame welfare recipients for the social crisis inflicted by successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, over the past three decades. They attack China and Chinese land buyers for attempting to take over the country.

While Hanson wins adherents by railing against the banks, demanding higher taxes on foreign companies and advocating protectionism, Bernardi makes a more direct appeal to his Christian fundamentalist constituency. He is an avid climate change denier and a campaigner for the claw-back of democratic rights, such as same-sex marriage and abortion. A message on his Australian Conservatives web site, posted on December 19, said the group was planning a “massive” 2017. “Our new state-of-the-art website is almost ready to go, and we will be launching it early next year, along with a number of important campaigns.” It claimed to have “60,000 supporters.”

Bernardi has apparently hinted that his new party will be called “Australian Majority.”

Politicians and the media blame the rise of figures such as Hanson and Bernardi on the working class and its alleged shift to the right. In reality, this is far from the truth. What is in fact underway, in Australia and internationally, is a pronounced radicalisation among growing layers of workers and young people, expressed in escalating opposition to social inequality, state repression and war. Those workers who voted for Trump in the US, did so not because they were “racists,” or “sexists,” but because the Democrat Obama, with the full support of Clinton, had presided over eight years of war, mass unemployment and austerity, and the rise of social inequality to historically unprecedented levels. Many decided that they could not live through four more years of the same.

Bernardi is particularly sensitive to this radicalisation, having visited the US in the midst of the presidential election campaign. On his return, he warned that a left-wing movement could emerge in Australia, similar to that which had coalesced behind Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Party candidate in the US primaries.

On November 3, just days before the US election, Bernardi told the *Guardian* that he believed “anyone other than Hillary Clinton would clean up in this contest.” He went on to say that if Sanders had been the Democratic candidate he would have won, because he had promised change and a “policy mix that appealed to many people.”

Sanders won more than 13 million votes in the primaries, only slightly fewer than Clinton, by declaring himself a “democratic socialist” and calling for a “political revolution” against the billionaires. He claimed to strongly oppose Clinton, criticising her ties to Wall Street and her highly-paid speeches to bankers and corporate chiefs. It was

precisely Sanders’ self-proclaimed commitment to socialism that attracted such strong support.

Having ridden on this rising sentiment for progressive social change, especially among young people, Sanders then demonstrated his real politics—his support for the “billionaire elite”—by nominating Clinton on the floor of the Democratic National Convention. Immediately after that, he publicly offered to support her campaign. As a result, many of his outraged supporters refused to vote for Clinton, while some expressed their disgust by voting for Trump.

Bernardi indicated his main fear when he spoke to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on December 11, explaining that a US pollster had shown him “research that found 50 per cent of young Americans believe socialism or communism is a preferable system to capitalism.”

Concerned, above all, to prevent such a development in Australia, Bernardi is hoping to use bigotry and prejudice to sow political confusion, provoke divisions in the working class and blame “foreigners” for the deteriorating conditions generated by Australian capitalism. Above all, as his comments on Sanders indicate, he is striving to prevent the emergence of a genuine socialist movement in the working class and among young people that fights for a revolutionary internationalist solution to the capitalist crisis.

Despite Bernardi’s intentions, there is considerable nervousness within the ruling establishment about a split in the Liberal Party, one of the two mainstays of bourgeois rule in Australia. In the past nine years, there have been five changes of government and four inner-party coups within the Liberal and Labor parties, creating an already toxic climate within Canberra’s corridors of power, and immense anxiety in corporate and financial boardrooms.

An *Australian* editorial on December 23 warned that “revived speculation about another conservative splinter” to be headed by Bernardi was a “reminder about the dangers of such political fracturing.” It urged Turnbull to adjust the “positioning” of his government, that is, to shift it far further to the right.

For now, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull ousted in September 2015, is appealing to Bernardi, a member of Abbott’s conservative faction in the Liberal Party, to remain in the party. But the instability and turmoil that has been wracking Canberra for the past several years will only deepen in 2017.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact