

Australian government in disarray over vote-swapping deal with One Nation

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A preferential vote deal struck by the Liberal Party with Pauline Hanson's right-wing One Nation party for the March 11 Western Australian state election has sharpened the political crisis within the Liberal-National Coalition across the country.

Facing a landslide defeat, the state Liberal government has negotiated a pact with Hanson's party, whose media polling in the state has soared to 13 percent since last July's federal election. Premier Colin Barnett's Liberal administration, in the former mining boom state, has slumped to just 30 percent in the polls, as part of a wider collapse in support for the Liberals nationally.

The Liberal Party will direct its second voting preferences in the upper house to One Nation, not to the rural-based National Party, which is part of the Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the federal level. In exchange, One Nation has agreed to direct its preferences to the Liberals in 35 lower house seats. The Nationals have retaliated in response, directing preferences in some upper house electorates to the Greens, thus endangering Liberal Party seats.

This is not merely a Western Australian development. Senior ministers in Turnbull's government were intimately involved in the horse-trading with One Nation, notably Finance Minister Mathias Cormann and Employment Minister Michaelia Cash—who took Hanson to dinner in Perth, the state capital, last December.

Turnbull and other cabinet members have strenuously defended the deal. While claiming to disagree with some of Hanson's anti-immigrant and protectionist policies, Turnbull emphasised that his government was now collaborating with her. "I have to say we work very closely with the One Nation senators," Turnbull

stated.

A previous Coalition government, under former Prime Minister John Howard, vowed in 2001 that it would never swap preferences with One Nation and then railroaded her to jail after her party's appeal to disaffected voters threatened to destabilise the two-party system.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the National Party leader, has bitterly denounced the deal, warning it would lead to a loss of government in Western Australia and, eventually, nationally. Tensions between the Liberals and the Nationals are deepening throughout Australia, due primarily to the crisis in rural and regional areas, where most of the National Party's support base lives. This has been caused by a severe loss of jobs and basic services, from mining-related closures and government austerity cuts.

This political crisis not only raises the prospect of a split in the federal Coalition government. It underscores the level of political disaffection wracking the entire parliamentary establishment. Buoyed by the election of Donald Trump as US president, Hanson is seeking to emulate the American billionaire's success in diverting the anger and alienation felt by millions of working class, small business and impoverished people into reactionary nationalist, xenophobic and protectionist directions.

After decades of declining living conditions and ever-more glaring social inequality imposed by Coalition and Greens-backed Labor governments alike, Hanson is cynically exploiting the seething hostility that has resulted. In this, she is walking in the footsteps of mining magnate Clive Palmer's Palmer United Party, which made a similar pitch in the lead up to the 2013 federal election, but has since imploded.

In Hanson's home state of Queensland, another ex-

mining boom state, media polling currently puts One Nation's support at 23 percent. This may be enough for her party to join a coalition government with either Labor or the Liberal National Party after the next state election, which could be held this year. The same poll reported that more than a third of respondents, while not necessarily agreeing with Hanson's policies, thought it would be good for One Nation to hold the balance of power in the next state parliament.

Behind the support for Hanson lie dangerous illusions that she represents the interests of ordinary working people, or that One Nation will at least push governments into backing away from their pro-corporate offensive on jobs, working conditions and essential public services such as health, education and welfare.

In reality, as indicated by the comments of Turnbull and Hanson herself, she is actively seeking a prominent position within the parliamentary system, having already assisted the Coalition government to push through socially destructive spending cuts. Not only does Hanson scapegoat Muslims, asylum seekers and foreign workers, in an effort to divide and weaken the working class. She denounces welfare recipients, thus blaming unemployed youth and workers, as well, for the relentless destruction of jobs and conditions by Australian corporations.

The Labor Party, while hypocritically criticising the Liberals for courting One Nation, is also seeking an accommodation with Hanson. Her economic nationalist and protectionist views dovetail with the efforts of the Labor and trade union movement to divert workers' discontent down divisive anti-Chinese and anti-foreign worker channels.



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