

Huge anti-government swing in Western Australian election

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At last Saturday's state election, intense hostility toward the political establishment, at both state and federal levels, has produced the largest ever swing in Western Australia (WA) against a sitting government. The Liberal Party government suffered a near-16 percentage point swing—losing a third of its vote—reducing the Liberals to around 12 seats in the 59-seat lower house of state parliament.

The defeat for Premier Colin Barnett's government was far worse than media polls predicted. Up to six government ministers have lost their seats. In some Perth suburban and regional electorates the swings were as high as 22 percent.

Far from being simply a WA issue, the political earthquake there indicates an intensification of the volatility that has ousted one government after another around the country over the past decade. The implosion of the mining boom has made the iron ore- and gas-rich state one of the sharpest expressions of the deep social discontent produced by the destruction of full-time jobs, the cutting of workers' wages and conditions and the gutting of public services, compounded in WA by the collapse in house prices.

The immediate beneficiary of the rout was the Labor Party, which picked up a swing of around 9.7 percent to give it an overwhelming majority of at least 40 seats in the 59-seat chamber. However, as with previous elections, the outcome will only deepen the ongoing assault on the working class. The incoming Labor government will be a vicious pro-business administration, committed to slashing public spending to meet the demands of global financial markets and backed to the hilt by the trade unions, which will seek to systematically suppress workers' opposition.

The WA vote has obvious national implications. It was the first electoral test for the political establishment since Prime Minister Turnbull's Liberal-National Coalition

government narrowly survived last July's federal election, clinging to a mere one-seat majority. Six months on, the future of his unstable government seems more perilous than ever. If the WA result were reproduced in a federal election, Turnbull's government would be swept from office, just on the vote in the state of WA alone.

In the last WA election in 2013, the Liberal Party won 47 percent of the primary vote, recording a swing of 8.8 percentage points. The Labor Party was decimated, largely due to hostility among ordinary working people toward former Prime Minister Julia Gillard's then federal Labor government. Gillard was replaced three months later by Kevin Rudd, in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent a sweeping defeat at the 2013 federal election.

Turnbull tried to dismiss Saturday's Liberal Party debacle as a product of "state issues." In reality, the political disaffection generated by the social crisis in WA is mirrored throughout the country, where entire regions are in recession. Moreover, key federal decisions—particularly support for the slashing of penalty wage rates for low-paid workers and for swapping second preference votes with Senator Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation party—only inflamed widespread discontent.

Labor and the unions cynically seized upon the declarations of support by Turnbull and Barnett for the wage-cutting ruling by the Fair Work Commission (FWC). This was doubly hypocritical. The previous Gillard government, and its industrial relations minister, current Labor leader Bill Shorten, ordered the FWC review of penalty rates. For their part, the unions, led by Shorten and others, have already struck enterprise agreements with major retail, fast food and other employers to scrap penalty rates for hundreds of thousands of workers.

The vote-swapping deal with One Nation backfired on both participants. It alienated sections of the Liberals'

electoral and business base concerned that the rise of right-wing populists like Hanson could fracture the political system. The WA Liberal Party's decision to preference One Nation above the rural-based Nationals, who are part of the federal Coalition, also fuelled rifts in Turnbull's government. Yesterday, Turnbull and Finance Minister Matthias Cormann, who was centrally involved in the One Nation deal, continued to defend it, against criticism by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the Nationals leader.

At the same time, Hanson's effort to prop up the Barnett government tore to shreds her "anti-establishment" credentials. Hanson had already demonstrated her support for the corporate, financial and political establishment's austerity offensive by backing 90 percent of the Turnbull government's legislation since last July. She underscored her backing for big business by endorsing push for the penalty rate cut.

Hanson's One Nation polled 4.7 percent last Saturday, far less than the 13 percent forecast by media polls at the start of the election campaign. The vote demonstrated that her electoral appeal rests largely on voters seeking to lodge a protest against the two-party pro-business consensus of Labor and the Liberals. Nevertheless, Hanson's efforts to divert seething alienation in nationalist and xenophobic directions had some success in the most economically and socially devastated areas. In those seats where One Nation fielded candidates, it secured around 8 percent of the vote, ranging up to around 12 percent in Mandurah, on Perth's southern outskirts and Kalgoorlie, a mining region.

Despite the record anti-government swing, the Greens, with 8.6 percent of the vote, failed to increase their 2013 result, when they lost a third of their support. Having propped up Gillard's minority government from 2010 to 2013, the Greens are widely regarded as part of the ruling establishment. Yesterday, they declared their intention to work closely with the state Labor government and help push its measures through the upper house, where they may retain their two seats. Greens WA campaign manager Andrew Beaton said the party intended to play a "constructive" role.

Labor garnered votes by opposing the Liberals' plan to privatise Western Power, the state's electricity grid, which would axe thousands of jobs and send household bills soaring. But the record shows that Labor governments have been in the forefront of privatisations, ever since the Hawke-Keating federal government sold off the Commonwealth Bank during the 1990s.

Headed by former naval officer Mark McGowan, the Labor government has pledged to the corporate elite to eliminate the annual \$3 billion state budget deficit by cutting social spending and public sector jobs. Working hand-in-glove with the unions, McGowan peddled a pro-business, nationalist and protectionist line, paralleling the anti-foreigner rhetoric of One Nation.

"As premier, I will deliver more local jobs, always putting WA jobs first," he declared. WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Deidre Willmott said employers looked forward to working with the government on "local content" legislation to ensure that WA companies were awarded government and military contracts.

On election eve, McGowan reassured the *Australian Financial Review*: "I'm very business friendly." Media magnate Kerry Stokes' *West Australian* newspaper called for a Labor victory, citing the disarray in the Liberal-National alliance and Labor's commitment to "local jobs."

Trade union bureaucrats likewise hailed Labor's win. At least half of McGowan's 20 shadow ministers are former union bosses. The unions' readiness to suppress workers' resistance to Labor's pro-business program was demonstrated by the recent 13-year agreement struck by the Maritime Union of Australia to stifle industrial action on offshore gas projects in return for a commitment to preference "Australian" workers for jobs.

Labor is also committed to US-led militarism. In his election night victory speech, McGowan paid tribute to his long-time mentor, former Labor Party federal leader and Australian ambassador to Washington, Kim Beazley, who is one of the most vehement defenders of Australian imperialism's strategic and military alliance with the US.



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