

# Populist senator to resign from Australian parliament and contest state election

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Nick Xenophon, a right-wing populist senator, announced last Friday he will resign from federal parliament this year in order to contest the 2018 South Australian state election.

The immediate trigger for Xenophon's move was a current High Court case determining whether he and six other members of parliament should be disqualified. The case is based on a reactionary constitutional provision that prohibits dual citizens from sitting in federal parliament. Xenophon allegedly holds an overseas British citizenship, based on his father's birth in Cyprus when it was a British colony.

Underlying Xenophon's announcement, however, are definite political calculations. He said he would resign regardless of the court's decision. His replacement in the Senate almost certainly would be another member of his party, the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT).

Xenophon is aiming to consolidate a base of support in South Australia (SA) by capitalising on intense social and political discontent. In the 2016 federal election, which saw a mass repudiation of Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens, NXT won over 20 percent of the SA vote. As a result, the party secured three Senate positions and one seat in the House of Representatives.

Media polling has indicated that Xenophon's state-based party, SA-BEST, may win up to 26 percent of votes in the SA election, compared to 27 percent for the incumbent Labor government and 31 percent for the Liberals. This would potentially hand SA-BEST the balance of power, or enable it to form a coalition government.

Xenophon began his political career by winning a state Legislative Assembly seat in the 1997 election on a single-issue, "anti-poker machine" platform. Since then, he has appealed to growing political disaffection, issuing populist denunciations of the major parties and advancing parochial, state-based condemnations of federal

authorities to channel social anger in a reactionary, nationalist direction.

In the 20 years since 1997, the sentiments that Xenophon has exploited have only intensified. SA Labor governments, in office since 2001, have presided over the dismantling of large sections of manufacturing and the destruction of essential social services, with the crucial assistance of the trade unions.

Labor and the unions have enforced round after round of sackings, job cuts and attacks on workers' conditions, especially in the auto industry. They insisted it was necessary for workers to accept endless cuts to make Australian manufacturing "internationally competitive" and prevent the car companies from closing.

In 2008, Mitsubishi shut its Adelaide plant, taking years of downsizing, supported by Labor and the unions, to their logical conclusion.

The Labor government of Premier Mike Rann stepped in to prevent any opposition from the workforce. It unveiled a sham \$50 million retraining scheme, which it claimed would mitigate the closure's impact. In reality, a third of the 930 sacked car workers never found employment again, and another third suffered losses in pay and conditions.

Next week, on October 20, General Motors will close its Holden plant in the northern Adelaide suburb of Elizabeth, marking the end of the Australian car assembly industry. The Labor government of Premier Jay Weatherill has established another bogus retraining scheme. More than 1,400 workers will be left unemployed, and more than 20,000 flow-on jobs are expected to be destroyed in the state's car parts sector.

Estimates for unemployment in Elizabeth are already as high as 33 percent. According to official figures, the number of manufacturing jobs in the state plummeted from over 100,000 in 1981 to 74,000 in 2011. Those numbers mask the growing prevalence of insecure, part-

time and casual work.

Across the state, real unemployment is thought to be above 10 percent. A myriad of social problems have emerged, with over 200,000 people living below the poverty line, and mounting indices of distress, including growing use of crystal methamphetamine, a destructive drug, among young people in regional areas.

The Rann and Weatherill governments have made sweeping budget cuts, imposed public sector layoffs, healthcare funding reductions and hundreds of sackings at vocational TAFE colleges, shutting courses and entire campuses.

Xenophon last Friday made clear that SA-BEST will seek to capitalise on popular anger. “Our state politics is broken, politically bankrupt,” he declared. “We have the same old soap opera script between Labor and Liberal, but little real policy debate, let alone solutions for the state’s many troubles.”

Xenophon indicated he would campaign on the mounting South Australian and national energy crisis, which has seen electricity prices soar. Power supplies have been jeopardised by the privatisation of power supply and generation, an uncoordinated reorganisation of the grid, and the subordination of energy policy to the profit interests of the major corporations. SA-BEST, however, has not issued any coherent policy and defends the capitalist market that is responsible for the crisis.

In reality, Xenophon advances a right-wing program, largely indistinguishable from that of the major parties. In addition to parochial calls to “put South Australia first,” SA-BEST’s policies include an escalation of economic nationalist measures, including procurement laws and tariffs targeting foreign businesses and workers.

This is aimed at dividing workers along national lines, and channelling hostility to the actions of Australian governments, the financial elite and unions into reactionary denunciations of overseas workers.

SA-BEST calls for vast subsidies to “Australian” businesses, on the sham pretext that this will increase “jobs and growth” in regional areas. Its program explicitly rejects calls for any increase in poverty-level aged pensions, advocates that the elderly be pushed into work, and supports the further corporatisation of public education.

SA-BEST calls for military production to be based in Australia, in line with Xenophon’s bid to promote the arms industry as a panacea for the growing jobs crisis. The party’s program points to Xenophon’s pro-war program, stating: “Australian defence policy must focus

on the protection of our nation and creating stability in our region.”

Xenophon has previously linked his calls for expanded military production to support for Australia’s role in US-led plans for war against North Korea and China. In late 2015, he wrote an opinion piece defending Australia’s construction of submarines on the grounds that they could “secretly insert Special Forces troops and take them out again, covertly lay sea mines in and around enemy ports, and launch surprise attacks.”

While he postures as a “political outsider,” Xenophon has been intimately involved in the sordid machinations of federal parliament. His party voted for 54 percent of the Liberal-National government’s legislation in the Senate between July 2016 and March 2017.

Since then, NXT has struck a series of deals with the government. Last month it helped push through “media reform” that abolishes limited constraints on the further concentration of newspaper, television and radio ownership in the hands of large corporations.

Despite his pro-business record, some media commentators bemoaned Xenophon’s shift to South Australia, expressing concern about its potentially destabilising impact on the political establishment in South Australia.

Chris Kenny, associate editor of the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, declared it was “terrible news.” He wrote: “Xenophon is very good at what he does—tapping into people’s grievances to maximise a protest vote. The trouble is this is the last thing SA needs right now.”

Anthony Green, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s election analyst, summed up the fears, writing that Xenophon’s decision was “the biggest shake-up in two-party politics in decades in Australia.”

The ruling elites are worried that the collapse of the official parliamentary set-up presages not only the emergence of right-wing populist formations but that workers and young people are being radicalised and will be drawn to socialist and revolutionary ideas.



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