Queensland election shocks intensify breakup of Australian political establishment

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While the exact results of last Saturday's election in the state of Queensland remain unclear, the collapse of support for both the traditional ruling parties—Labor and the Liberal National Party (LNP)—has underscored the disintegration of the post-World War II political order. At this stage with a number of seats still undecided, neither party is in a position to form a majority government.

Widespread disgust and hostility toward the entire parliamentary establishment produced the lowest combined vote for the two parties in a Queensland state election since 1906. Almost a third of the electorate voted for "other" parties or independents who claimed, however falsely, to represent an alternative to what are now widely derided as the twin parties of big business.

This marks a further fragmentation of support for the two-party setup that held together Australia's official political framework for decades. It is a far cry from the 1950s to early 1980s when the two "major" parties could garner some 90 percent of the vote. The Queensland result indicates that the breakup is accelerating. According to one media calculation, the combined vote for the two parties has dropped by almost 8 percentage points since the 2016 federal election to just 69.5 percent.

More than 30 years of attacks on the jobs, conditions and basic services of the working class, implemented by one government after another, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have produced seething disaffection that has yet to find conscious expression in the building of a mass socialist party. This parallels similar experiences internationally, where years of deteriorating economic and social conditions, enforced by the parties and trade unions that workers once supported, have generated intense political discontent.

At this stage, the main beneficiaries in Australia are right-wing populist outfits like Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation and Bob Katter's Australian Party. They are cynically exploiting social misery to try to divert the anger in nationalist and xenophobic directions. With a handful of seats, they may determine who holds office in Queensland, possibly together with several local independents who are seeking to channel the discontent on a parochial basis. But these formations have no answer for the economic and social deterioration because they are all wedded to the market-driven capitalist profit system, which is the source of the crisis.

The reverberations of the Queensland result are already being felt nationally, accelerating the unravelling of the federal Liberal-National government, because the LNP vote crashed by about 8 percentage points to around 33 percent. But the implications go far further. Labor's vote also fell—by up to 9 points in some working-class areas—to around 35 percent. This points to a deeper disconnect between the political elite and the increasingly difficult lives of millions of people and their growing concerns about the danger of war.

This instability is part of a wider fragility of the political system. No federal government has lasted more than three years since the landslide defeat of the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government in 2007.

Public recriminations have erupted from inside the Coalition against Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who ousted his predecessor Tony Abbott in 2015; and he confronts splits and revolts on a number of fronts.

Last week Turnbull abruptly cancelled this week's scheduled session of the House of Representatives, fearing a defeat on the floor that could effectively bring down his government. It has staggered on with growing difficulty since being reduced to a bare one-seat

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majority at last year's election. The Queensland result has heightened the government's turmoil.

Key figures in the rural-based National Party, particularly from regional areas of Queensland where the LNP vote fell to as low as 25 percent, are threatening to cross the floor and join Labor and the Greens in voting for an inquiry into the rapacious activities of the major banks and insurance companies. This is a ploy to appease ruined farmers and business operators who have suffered at the hands of these corporate giants, but it is vehemently opposed by Turnbull and his supporters, who directly represent the interests of the financial elite.

Overlapping with the push for a banking inquiry are moves by the most socially conservative elements within the Coalition to block or amend government-backed legislation introduced in the name of giving effect to the 61 percent vote in favour of the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the government's recent postal survey. These elements, including Abbott and Treasurer Scott Morrison, are seeking to mobilise a right-wing constituency.

The proposed bill already entrenches ongoing discrimination against same-sex couples, fraudulently using the banner of "freedom of religion" to insist that churches and religious bigots must be able to denounce gay people and refuse to service their weddings. Six government ministers and most Liberal-National senators voted yesterday against the government and in favour of even more sweeping measures to stigmatise same-sex couples.

Next week, the government is likely to be further destabilised when the lower house finally reconvenes from a five-week recess. Desperate to hold onto office until the new year, Turnbull delayed until Tuesday a deadline for all members of parliament to table documents proving they do not hold, and are not entitled to hold, dual citizenship by birth or descent. An unknown number of MPs—possibly more than 20—may face disqualification, on top of the nine already removed since June. This could end the government's majority.

The disqualification furore, upheld by a unanimous High Court ruling in October, involves the use of a section of the 1901 Constitution to bar any citizen from standing for parliament if they lack what the judges called "undivided loyalty" to the Australian nation. This amounts to a nationalist witch-hunt. About half the country's citizens cannot run for election now unless they formally renounce their "foreign" rights.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, this is a part of a calculated attempt to create a war-time political atmosphere, with all "loyal" citizens expected to demonstrate their devotion to the nation. This is under conditions of escalating world tensions, particularly between the US and China, in which both the Turnbull government and the Labor Party have pledged full support to any US-led war.

The stoking of patriotism by the ruling elite is an anxious bid to cultivate a right-wing constituency to divert the inevitable eruption of struggle by the working class against the danger of war and social inequality. The perplexity and frustration in ruling circles was voiced today by Dennis Shanahan, political editor of Murdoch's *Australian*, who wrote of "an air of despair and a fatal paralysis" dominating the government.

Unless the working class intervenes, advancing the socialist and internationalist alternative to capitalism and national divisions, the parliamentary crisis will become a vehicle for refashioning official politics along nationalist and authoritarian lines to suppress the mounting popular unrest.

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