

Australian by-election underscores ongoing political instability

Our reporter
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The Liberal-National Coalition government retained the federal seat of Bennelong, in northwestern Sydney, in a by-election last Saturday that underscored the fragility of the official parliamentary set-up.

Liberal candidate John Alexander received 44.9 percent of the primary vote, down 5.5 percent compared with the 2016 federal election. Labor's Kristina Keneally gained a 7 percent swing on the party's election result last year, securing just 36 percent of primary votes.

Alexander was the beneficiary of preferences from the right-wing populist Australian Conservatives, who polled at 4.3 percent, and the Christian Democratic Party, at 3.1 percent, ensuring that he won the seat.

One indication of disaffection with the entire political establishment was the informal vote—those who spoiled their ballot, or failed to vote correctly—which was up 2.5 points, to 7.24 percent. According to preliminary figures, another 15 percent of enrolled electors may not have cast a ballot at all, despite voting being compulsory.

The by-election was triggered by Alexander's resignation from the House of Representatives last November, after it emerged that he may have been a British-Australian dual citizen by descent. He was only able to recontest the seat after formally renouncing any right to British citizenship.

Under anti-democratic provisions contained in Section 44 of the Australian Constitution, individuals "entitled" to the "rights and privileges of a foreign power" are not permitted to hold federal office. The clause effectively prohibits about half the population from standing for parliament.

Last October, the High Court ruled that five MPs, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, were ineligible to remain in parliament, because they had not

renounced their dual citizenship before being elected. The MPs were ousted, despite claiming they did not know of their overseas citizenship rights, triggering a series of by-elections.

Seven more MPs have been referred to the High Court, with the media alleging that others may follow. The campaign has been continued, by the corporate press and the political establishment, despite its destabilising impact, in a bid to promote nationalism. It is aimed at diverting growing social discontent, and legitimising Australia's increasingly prominent role in US-led wars and military preparations.

The by-elections have jeopardised the government's one-seat majority in the lower house of federal parliament. If Alexander had been defeated, the Coalition government's share of seats in the 150-member House of Representatives would have been reduced to 75.

Despite Alexander's victory, the result has further fuelled commentary suggesting that the Coalition would not retain government in a federal election that may be called as early as next year. If the swings to Labor in Bennelong were replicated nationally, the Turnbull government would be ousted from office.

The campaign in Bennelong was dominated by mutual political mudslinging, and attempts to whip-up an atmosphere of nationalism and xenophobia, to distract from the pro-business policies of all the official parties.

The Liberal Party's campaign highlighted Labor candidate Kristina Keneally's alleged ties to Eddie Obeid and Ian McDonald, former New South Wales Labor politicians convicted of corruption, when she was the state's premier from 2009 to 2011.

Keneally likewise appealed to widespread opposition to the Turnbull government's cuts to education,

healthcare and social spending, to obscure the fact that the austerity measures being imposed by the Liberal-Nationals are a continuation of the pro-business policies of former federal Labor governments.

The Liberals heavily promoted anti-Chinese xenophobia, alleging that sections of the Labor Party are in cahoots with a Chinese Communist Party plot to “undermine Australian democracy.”

In the week before polling, Labor Senator Sam Dastyari was forced to resign from federal parliament, after government and media attacks claiming that he was a “double agent” because of his dealings, as a Labor fundraiser, with a Chinese businessman.

Dastyari was also denounced for a speech two years ago, in which he made tepid warnings against direct Australian involvement in US military provocations against Beijing in the South China Sea. He was also condemned for telling a Chinese donor that their phones might have been tapped by the intelligence agencies.

Dastyari has been a particular target in a year-long anti-China campaign spearheaded by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Fairfax Media and Australia’s domestic intelligence agency, ASIO. The witch-hunt is based on lurid and unsubstantiated claims of pervasive Chinese “interference” in Australian politics, universities and research projects.

The campaign is aimed at conditioning the population behind Washington’s deepening confrontation and preparations for war with Beijing, in which Australia is playing a critical role.

Keneally and other Labor politicians criticized the government’s rhetoric during the by-election as “Chinaphobic,” in a bid to appeal to the large ethnic Chinese constituency in the Bennelong electorate.

Labor’s stance, however, amounts to nothing more than cynical posturing. Labor leader Bill Shorten and other Labor ministers legitimised the attacks on Dastyari, and effectively forced him out of the parliament, by publicly calling for his resignation.

Moreover, the Labor Party supports the US military alliance to the hilt and previous federal Labor governments were instrumental in aligning Australia with the US war drive against China.

The government’s anti-China campaign appears to have provoked opposition in the election particularly among Chinese voters. The Chinese community makes

up around 21 percent of all residents and an estimated 16 percent of enrolled voters.

An article in yesterday’s *Australian* noted: “Of the 16 voting booths that recorded a swing to Labor greater than the seat average, 13 were in suburbs where people of Chinese ancestry made up 20 percent or more of the population.” It pointed out that the booth with the highest swing to Labor (12.66 percent) also had one of the largest Chinese populations in the electorate—with 34.5 percent of its voters being of Chinese descent.

The results suggest a growing recognition, among Chinese-Australians, along with broader sections of the population, that the McCarthyite attacks against supposed “Chinese influence” are a threat to the democratic rights of ordinary people.

Alexander responded to his victory by declaring it to be a renaissance of Turnbull’s leadership of the Liberal-National Coalition, which has been rent by deep divisions. Shorten and Keneally likewise claimed that the swings towards Labor foreshadowed a sweeping victory in a federal election next year.

In reality, the by-election was further proof that faced with widespread political discontent, the official political parties, which are committed to the corporate elite’s program of war and austerity, have nothing to offer but lies and cynical bluster, along with nationalism and racism aimed at dividing the working class.



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