

South Australian election campaign points to deepening political alienation

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Tomorrow's state election in South Australia marks another stage in the disintegration of the two-party parliamentary system that has propped up capitalist rule across the country since World War II.

Anxiety and uncertainty have dominated the political and media establishment throughout the election campaign. No party leader or commentator has been able to predict the result, because of the ongoing collapse of support, across the state and nationally, for the two long-time establishment parties: Labor and Liberal.

Media polls indicate that neither party is likely to win a majority of the 47 seats in the lower house of parliament. So a minority government will have to be formed, relying on the support of various "independents" or a "third party."

The widespread alienation has been fueled by deteriorating living standards. Successive federal and state governments have imposed blow after blow on the working class in South Australia—including General Motors' closure of the last remaining auto assembly plant last year.

At the previous state election in 2014, Premier Jay Weatherill's already unpopular decade-old pro-business Labor government failed to win a majority, obtaining only 35.8 percent of the vote. But it clung to office with the support of a regional independent, who was rewarded with a key cabinet ministry, and an ex-Liberal state leader.

This year's campaign has again featured a barrage of phony promises and confected attacks on each other by Labor and Liberal. Both are pledging to work with business to "create jobs" and cut soaring electricity bills, while reversing the ongoing deterioration of public health, schools and infrastructure.

Such are the lies being told that the state's electoral commissioner this week handed down extraordinary rulings that both Labor and Liberal contravened the

state's Electoral Act by making "inaccurate and misleading" claims.

The commissioner ordered retractions and corrections be published of the Liberals' claim that its energy scheme would save households more than \$300 a year, and Labor's allegation that the Liberals had a secret plan to cut \$557 million from the state's share of national Goods and Services Tax revenue.

Late last year, in a much-publicised attempt to divert the disaffection, and fill the political vacuum, ex-federal Senator Nick Xenophon, a right-wing populist, quit his federal Senate seat to stand as a candidate in the state poll, heading his most recent formation, SA Best.

Xenophon is trying to channel the discontent in nationalist and protectionist directions, essentially backing big business interests. In particular, he has worked with the trade unions to secure multi-billion-dollar contracts to build warships in Adelaide as part of the federal Liberal-National government's massive military buildup.

At the same time, to garner votes Xenophon is falsely posing as an "outsider." He told a party leaders' debate: "This election is a chance to replace the bastards of whichever persuasion... For the first time ever in the state's political history, there is a third alternative from the political centre."

That debate itself, however, pointed to the lack of public enthusiasm for any of the contenders. The host, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), invited 140 hand-picked people, said to be of all voting persuasions. Only about 100 showed up, forcing the staff to stack up the spare chairs and shepherd the participants closer to the front. Empty chairs made for bad television, one ABC producer told the audience.

Under the guise of addressing the state's unemployment crisis, each of the three leaders—Weatherill, Xenophon and Liberal leader Steven Marshall—used the debate to make

pitches to the financial markets, desperately seeking to attract investment.

Repeating Labor's main slogan, "making jobs our number one priority," Weatherill claimed the government was attracting major companies. He cited Tesla, whose billionaire owner Elon Musk is using the state to test large-scale battery projects, supposedly to resolve the supply shortages and price hikes produced by the privatisation of the electricity networks.

Marshall declared that, rather than providing subsidies for individual companies, the Liberals would woo investors by cutting payroll taxes. Xenophon was vaguer, calling for the state government to "harness an entrepreneurial spirit" and facilitate "big dreams and big ideas."

The corporate media initially heavily promoted Xenophon and raised the prospect that he could become the next state premier. In recent weeks, however, it has turned against him, and played down his chances, out of concern that political instability could allow the underlying social unrest to erupt to the surface.

Recent reports, for example, have revealed that while Xenophon publicly opposes large corporate donations to political parties, SA Best last month received \$50,000 from Cartwheel Resources, which wants faster approval for mining exploration around the Lake Gairdner national park, in the state's centre.

Even so, the media polls suggest that SA Best still could hold the "balance of power" in the next parliament and that its second preference votes could determine who forms a government.

As the WSWs has documented, Xenophon is a right-wing nationalist, peddling anti-Chinese messages in particular, and pushing a militarist program of building submarines and other weaponry to confront Beijing. SA Best seeks to divide workers along national, even parochial, lines, and divert hostility to governments and the corporate elite into the demonising of overseas workers.

Another right-wing formation, Senator Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives, is also vying to exploit the disaffection. Bernardi, a social conservative, quit the Liberal Party last year in a bid to emulate US President Donald Trump in building a far-right constituency.

Bernardi's "free market" proposals include repealing \$3 billion in state taxes, axing renewable energy state subsidies, and undertaking a "cost-benefit analysis" to either bring coal-fired power plants back to the state or build a nuclear power plant.

According to media polls, Bernardi is unlikely to pick up any lower house seats but may still emerge as a "kingmaker" in the state's upper house, where his party obtained two seats last year by merging with the Christian-based Family First.

The underlying political turmoil was highlighted this week by the release of a report by the Grattan Institute, a business and government-backed think tank, warning that "protest politics is on the rise in Australia," because of "collapsing trust in politicians and the major parties."

"The vote share for minor parties and independents has been rising for a decade," the report noted. "At the 2016 federal election it hit its highest level since the Second World War. More than one-in-four Australians voted for someone other than the ALP [Labor], the LNP [Liberal-National] or the Greens in the Senate. First-preference Senate votes for minor parties and 'outsider' candidates leapt from 12 percent in 2004 to 26 percent in 2016."

In an effort to shore up the existing political and economic order, the report urged "our political leaders" to "heed the warning signs and focus on what matters to voters: restoring trust and social cohesion."

But the only "solution" the report offered was for politicians to stop raising public expectations. "They will need to stop over-promising and under-delivering, on everything from reducing power bills to making houses more affordable and developing regional Australia," it said.

This is the voice of the corporate elite speaking. Without "overpromising," the various political servants of big business must find ways to get elected and impose its austerity dictates on an increasingly hostile population.



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