

Liberals take office in South Australia with a minority vote

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In another indication of widespread political alienation and volatility, the Liberal Party will form a fragile government in South Australia after winning only 37.4 percent of the vote in last Saturday's state election.

Because of the long built-up hostility to the state's 16-year-old Labor government, the Liberals scraped into government, possibly with a one-seat majority, despite their vote actually falling by 7.4 percentage points.

This is another milestone in the collapse of support for, let alone trust in, governments. The Liberals' "victory" vote was only marginally higher than the 35.8 percent that Labor obtained in the last South Australian state election in 2014. Labor then clung to office for four more years with the support of right-wing independents.

These anti-democratic results are part of a wider pattern in recent Australian elections—state and federal. They point to the breakdown of the two-party political set-up, based on the Liberals and Labor, through which the capitalist class has ruled since World War II.

Labor's vote fell further, dropping nearly 2 points to 33.9 percent, tracking the historic lows recorded for Labor in federal and state elections since Labor last held office federally from 2010 to 2013 in a minority government propped up by the Greens.

Tracing Labor's declining vote in working-class areas is difficult because of a substantial redrawing of electoral boundaries. But in the electorate of Elizabeth, covering some of Adelaide's most socially-devastated northern suburbs, Labor barely held on with a vote of 52 percent.

Mass unemployment has worsened in that electorate, officially hitting 31 percent, since General Motors last year shut down Australia's last car assembly plant,

destroying thousands of jobs in related industries. The informal vote in Elizabeth—people casting an invalid ballot in an election where voting is compulsory—was 6.1 percent, providing another limited expression of disaffection.

Another striking feature of Saturday's result is the failure of "third parties" to capitalise on the discontent. Former federal Senator Nick Xenophon's SA Best party picked up just 14.7 percent of the state-wide vote, and is likely to hold no lower house seats.

Just months ago, Xenophon was touted by the corporate media as the state's most likely next premier after he quit federal parliament to form his state-based party. Yet, he even lost his bid to win a seat for himself. His publicity stunts and appeals for support to "keep the bastards honest," provided no alternative to people, including young workers. They are looking for answers to the devastating destruction of secure jobs, falling real wages and soaring cost of living.

Xenophon's vote was concentrated mainly in Liberal-held seats, where SA Best's tallies rose to around 25 percent, reflecting its right-wing, pro-business pitch. Beneath Xenophon's attempt to posture as a political outsider is a reactionary nationalist and protectionist program, especially seeking to boost the state as a site for vastly expanded warship construction and other military spending.

Senator Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives, which broke away from the Liberals last year, fared even worse. South Australia is Bernardi's home state, yet his formation picked up only about 3 percent of the vote. This is less than half of the vote obtained in the 2014 state election by Family First, a Christian fundamentalist party that Bernardi essentially took over last year.

Bernardi's efforts to emulate US President Donald

Trump by building a far-right, social conservative constituency also flopped in last Saturday's federal by-election in neighbouring Victoria, in the Melbourne electorate of Batman. There the Australian Conservatives polled only about 6.5 percent, even though the Liberal Party ran no candidate in the seat.

These failures by right-wing populists follow similar electoral disasters for the Jacqui Lambie network in the March 3 Tasmanian state election and for Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in recent Queensland and Western Australian state elections. The results suggest that voters are drawing conclusions from their experiences with such formations which have no solutions to the acute social crisis and function as nothing more than safety valves to prop up a decaying parliamentary order.

But the worst results of all last Saturday were recorded by the Greens. In South Australia, their vote fell another 2 points to 6.6 percent. This is not enough to retain a federal Senate post in the next national election. That followed the disaster in the election in Tasmania, where the Greens vote has plummeted from 16 percent to 10 percent since they formed a state coalition government with Labor from 2010 to 2014.

And the Greens failed to win the seat of Batman, obtaining only 40.3 percent of the vote despite the lack of a candidate from the Liberals, whose supporters the Greens energetically wooed. The media had promoted the prospect of the Greens taking the seat on the basis of the party's appeal to voters in the wealthier, inner-city southern parts of the electorate.

However, Labor retained the seat, although only with a primary vote of 42.7 percent. Labor's vote rose by 7.8 points, predominantly by attracting Liberal supporters in the same gentrified parts of the electorate. Labor's candidate was long-time senior trade union official Ged Kearney, who has played a central role in suppressing the struggles of workers for decades.

The capitalist media has depicted the weekend's outcomes as a triumph for the two-party duopoly. The *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly declared: "The old empires are striking back." Kelly said the two election results "starkly revealed" the "hubris and limits of the minor parties."

The comment is absurd. The results point to a deeper crisis of the parliamentary order. Increasingly frustrated voters are unable to find within the capitalist political

order any answers to the pressing issues they confront—declining living and working conditions, widening social inequality, deteriorating social services and the rising danger of war.

Parties like Xenophon's, Bernardi's, Hanson's and Lambie's have sought to divert the mass popular hostility and resentment in nationalist and xenophobic directions. Yet they have failed to win sustained support. Their rises and falls have highlighted the instability of the existing political system.

This situation also underscores the crisis of perspective in the working class. So far, the seething hostility that exists has not been translated into support for the only progressive alternative—the fight for a workers' government based an internationalist and socialist program to unite workers internationally against capitalism.

Far from alleviating the social distress facing millions of people, the political impasse is producing mounting demands by the financial and corporate elite for an even more ferocious offensive on the working class.

Today's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* declares: "The big parties must get us living within our means." It insists that Liberal-National and Labor governments alike must cut "big spending" on health and education, and "reform" the tax and welfare systems to "sharpen incentives to work, save and invest."



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