

Australian government delays by-elections for nine weeks

Mike Head
26 May 2018

In an apparent bid to cling to office for a while longer, the increasingly unstable and faction-ridden Liberal-National government has set July 28—still nine weeks away—as the date for five simultaneous by-elections that could determine its future.

Thursday's announcement of the date followed almost two weeks of delay and uncertainty, during which media reports indicated that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was considering calling an early general election, or else a half Senate election, to try to break through opposition to his government's key economic platform—massive company tax cuts.

Four of the five by-elections result from the latest “dual citizenship” disqualifications—a witch-hunt that is ousting from parliament anyone deemed to lack sole loyalty to the Australian nation state. On May 11, four members of parliament resigned because the High Court ruled that people were ineligible to stand for office even if they had taken “reasonable steps” to renounce their entitlement to citizenship in another country—which can stem from their parents or even grandparents.

The ruling came just a day after the May 8 budget, in which the government offered income tax cuts in the hope of laying the basis for an early general election before economic conditions worsen because of US trade war threats, especially against China, and intensifying war dangers.

The budget failed to give the government any “bounce” in its poor opinion polling, not least because of widespread hostility to its proposed multi-billion dollar tax handout to the country's biggest banks and conglomerates. The government's hopes of pushing the company tax cuts through the Senate suffered a possible fatal blow earlier this week, when right-wing populist Pauline Hanson, fearing an electoral backlash,

suddenly withdrew her One Nation party's support.

Every aspect of the by-election timing, including the nationalist and patriotic propaganda surrounding the parliamentary purge, is anti-democratic. The date was pushed back to July 28—leaving the five seats empty for 80 days—despite the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) formally advising the government it would be “ready and would be able to conduct the by-elections” on June 30.

Cynical political calculations are clearly involved. All five seats were held by opposition members—four Labor and one Centre Alliance. Until mid-August, when the new members take their seats, the government no longer relies on the wafer-thin one-seat majority it has held since it nearly lost a mid-2016 double dissolution election.

If Labor loses any of the seats, which is quite possible because of the widespread disaffection from the entire political establishment, rifts could open up in the Labor leadership. Turnbull could attempt to exploit a crisis in the opposition by calling a snap election, which is constitutionally possible after August 4.

July 28 was also the date set for the Labor Party national conference. As a result of the by-elections, the party has been forced to reschedule the gathering at considerable expense. The government cited school holidays in July as the reason for postponing the by-elections until the end of that month, but previous by-elections have been held during such periods.

The primary justification for the delay was to give the AEC time to implement new regulations designed to reinforce the High Court's ruling. All candidates will be required to supply information on their citizenship and that of their parents, grandparents and spouse, as well as details of any renunciation of dual citizenship.

This reactionary requirement is designed to police the

court's strict interpretation of an arcane section of the 1901 constitution, effectively rendering ineligible more than half of the country's ever-more diverse population because they, their parents, grandparents or spouses were born overseas.

Although the new vetting process will formally be voluntary, potential candidates will be warned to seek legal advice, effectively threatening them with prosecution if they are discovered to have given incorrect or incomplete information.

Section 44(i) of the constitution states that no-one can nominate for parliament if he or she has supposed "allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power" or is even "entitled" to the "rights and privileges of a foreign power."

In 1901 colonial Australia, there was no concept of national citizenship—just of being a "subject" of the British monarch—but the anachronistic section is now being used to demand undivided "allegiance" to Australia amid preparations to join a potential US-led war against China.

For months, Turnbull's government has been wracked by divisions, at the root of which are mounting economic and geo-strategic pressures bound up with Australian capitalism's dependence on both the US and China, Australia's biggest export market.

Turnbull faces heightened demands from Washington to step up Canberra's commitment to the US confrontation with China, including by massive military spending. This means further slashing social spending. The government, with Labor's backing, is also seeking to push through draconian "foreign interference" legislation directed against China and internal anti-war opposition.

At the same time, Turnbull has been unable to push through the huge company tax cuts that the financial elite has demanded are essential to compete globally and avert a feared withdrawal of investment.

Hanson's backflip this week only highlighted the government's predicament and its reliance on her anti-immigrant party and other right-wing populists who won Senate seats in 2016 by exploiting the intense political and social discontent.

The government's so-called enterprise plan to slash the company tax rate from 30 percent to 25 percent by 2026 was the centrepiece of its 2016, 2017 and 2018 budgets, and its 2016 election campaign, which left it

with only 30 seats in the 76-member Senate.

In its desperation to get the Senate votes it needs to deliver the company tax bonanza, the government signed a secret formal agreement with Hanson, who agitates against Muslims, Asians and refugees, and has demanded a huge cut to immigration.

Various incoherent efforts by Hanson this week to explain her backflip to renege on the deal underscored the nervousness throughout the parliamentary elite because of the seething disaffection produced by years of declining real wages, soaring living costs and deteriorating social services.

Hanson, who currently controls three Senate seats, simultaneously criticised the government for not implementing the tax plan faster and claiming it was not supported by the people.

She blamed Turnbull for failing to "sell" the tax plan. "The people in general don't want it. It has not been well received. The government has not been able to sell the package to the people and they haven't cut through," she complained.

Alluding to the underlying economic vulnerability of Australian capitalism, and echoing the concerns of the corporate elite, Hanson also voiced disappointment with the government's debt reduction strategy, warning the budget was built on "eggshells" and could "crash at any time."

For its own electoral survival, the Labor Party is posturing as an opponent of the tax handout, but it is just as much a party of big business as the Liberals and Nationals. As recently as 2011, Labor leader Bill Shorten—then a key minister in the Gillard Labor government—advocated lower company taxes.

For the past three decades, Labor governments have led the way in restructuring the economy at the expense of the working class. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s slashed the company tax rate more than any other government in Australian history—from 49 to 33 percent—setting the stage for accelerating social inequality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact