

Australian by-elections threaten to deepen political instability

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Five federal by-elections across the country this Saturday look set to intensify the instability wracking the Australian parliament. A poor showing for either the Liberal-National Coalition government or the Labor Party opposition could trigger leadership challenges in the lead-up to a federal election due to be held before next May.

Four of the five polls were sparked by the forced resignation of sitting MPs resulting from the ongoing purge of federal parliamentarians entitled to dual citizenship.

In a reactionary nationalist campaign, the corporate press and all the parliamentary parties have demanded that parliamentarians demonstrate “unqualified allegiance” to Australia, including by providing detailed genealogical records. This is aimed at whipping up an atmosphere of jingoism and militarism.

The elections are part of a deepening crisis of the official political establishment. Virtually every election over the past decade, at the state and federal level, has been characterised by swings against the major parties.

The breakup of the two-party set-up, through which the Australian capitalist class has ruled for over a century, is the product of immense popular disaffection with declining or stagnating wages, a rapidly rising cost of living, and the dismantling of public healthcare, education and welfare by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Fears that the by-elections will feature unpredictable swings have been exacerbated by the fact that they are taking place across four states, encompassing up to half a million voters in total.

The Liberal-Nationals are not contesting the Western Australian seats of Fremantle and Perth, so they will almost certainly be retained by Labor.

In the semi-rural electorate of Mayo, near South Australia’s capital Adelaide, Rebekha Sharkie is seeking to regain a seat she won from the Liberal-Nationals in

2016 as a representative of the right-wing populist Nick Xenophon Team, since renamed the “Centre Alliance.” Senior Liberal-National figures have campaigned heavily for her government opponent, Georgina Downer.

In the seats of Braddon, in northwest Tasmania, and Longman, north of Queensland’s capital, Brisbane, Labor is seeking to head off Liberal-National challengers. Both electorates are among the most impoverished in the country. They are microcosms of the social crisis confronting broad sections of the population, encompassing suburbs and rural areas with high rates of poverty, unemployment and distress.

In their campaigns, Labor and the Coalition have competed to establish themselves as the “toughest” on immigration and immigrants. This is aimed at diverting attention from their own responsibility for the social conditions and scapegoating the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

Liberal-National Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has touted his government’s role in reducing Australia’s migration intake to its lowest level in a decade by cracking down on “visa rorts.” Other government figures have called for even more stringent visa restrictions.

The government has helped stoke a racist campaign alleging, without any evidence, that Melbourne, the country’s second largest city, is in the grip of a violent crime wave perpetrated by “African gangs.”

Last week, Turnbull declared there was “real anxiety about crime” perpetrated by African immigrants. On Wednesday, former Coalition Prime Minister Tony Abbott said the country had “stirred up trouble for ourselves by letting people in who are difficult to integrate.”

For his part, federal Labor leader Bill Shorten has denounced foreign workers as responsible for growing unemployment, and called for a crackdown on temporary work visas.

Both the major parties are seeking support from right-wing populist outfits and individuals, who have played an increasingly prominent role amid the worsening breakdown of the two-party system over the past decade.

In Longman, the Liberal-Nationals will receive the second vote preferences of the xenophobic Pauline Hanson's One Nation party that, according to some surveys, is polling at over 10 percent. Since the last federal election in 2016, One Nation has provided crucial support for the Coalition, voting with the government in parliament 83 percent of the time this year.

In another indication of the increasingly dysfunctional character of official politics, One Nation's campaign in the seat has been bolstered by the support of former Labor Party leader Mark Latham. He has participated, alongside Hanson, in "robocalls" to Longman voters denouncing Shorten as "dishonest."

Labor, which was a beneficiary of One Nation preferences when it won Longman in the 2016 federal election, is also courting unpredictable populists.

In Braddon, Labor will receive the preferences of Craig Garland, an "anti-politician" independent who has demagogically denounced both the major parties. If Garland replicates his result in the March Tasmanian state election, where he won 2,000 votes, his preferences could secure the seat for Labor.

Labor and the Coalition have resorted to blatant pork-barrelling in a desperate attempt to win votes. According to an analysis by the *Guardian*, the two parties combined have made promises worth more than \$450 million in the three contested electorates of Mayo, Longman and Braddon. The empty promises, which will inevitably be shelved after the discovery of budgetary "black holes," have only heightened the popular contempt for the political establishment.

In campaign appearances Shorten has pledged that Labor will increase funding to healthcare, education and ensure the provision of jobs, accusing the government of only serving the interests of the corporate elite.

Shorten's tepid rhetoric has done nothing to overcome widespread disaffection over the role played by the previous Rudd and Gillard Labor governments in propping up the banks and imposing on the working class the burden of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis.

Shorten is, at the same time, attempting to assure the financial elite that a Labor government would best serve the "national interest," i.e., the interests of big business and the banks.

A significant swing against Labor, or the Liberal-

Nationals, in any of the contested seats could intensify moves against Turnbull and Shorten.

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese is widely tipped to be preparing a leadership challenge. He has sought to capitalise on anxiety in corporate circles over Shorten's bogus populist posturing.

Delivering the Whitlam Oration late last month, Albanese called on Labor to "engage with business" and don the mantle of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, which spearheaded the deregulation of the economy and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Turnbull's leadership has been wracked by rumours of prospective challenges from Abbott and other figures in the most conservative sections of the Coalition. The government's fragility has been exacerbated by ongoing frustration in corporate circles at its failure to impose the full extent of the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets.

For all the mud-slinging and infighting, the campaigns have underscored the unanimity of the political establishment behind an assault on the democratic rights of the population and an alignment with Washington's militarism.

In the lead-up to the by-elections, Labor joined forces with the government to push through sweeping "foreign interference" laws that constitute the most significant attack on civil liberties since World War II. The legislation seeks to criminalise alleged links with China and opposition to US-led plans for war against Beijing.

Australia's role in those preparations was underscored this week when Australia's defence and foreign ministers met with their US counterparts to commit to even deeper military ties aimed at shoring up Washington's dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Previous Labor governments played a central role in integrating Australia into the US military build-up in the region.



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