

Australian by-elections underscore deepening alienation from political establishment

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Five by-elections held across Australia on Saturday gave a further revealing indication of widespread hostility towards the openly pro-big business program of the Liberal-National Coalition government, and disaffection from all parties of the official political establishment.

On the surface, the result means that the government's majority in the lower house of parliament remains the same, just one seat. The opposition Labor Party retained the four seats it previously held, and the right-wing nationalist Centre Alliance (formerly the Nick Xenophon Team) kept its single seat.

But beneath the surface, the results point to a further breakup of the two-party parliamentary system that has served the interests of the corporate and financial elites since World War II. Candidates claiming to oppose the major parties picked up sizeable votes, as they have during the past decade.

Within the twisted framework of official politics, the voting patterns provided only a pale and distorted picture of the deep discontent over falling real wages, the rise of insecure work, the deteriorating state of health, education and other essential social services, and the rapidly escalating burden of housing and utility costs.

Despite large swings against the Coalition, and its decision to not even stand candidates in two of the five electorates, the opposition Labor Party's vote barely rose from its historic lows. Nor did the vote for the Greens, who propped up the last Labor government from 2007 to 2013. Among wide layers of the population, the Greens are recognised as providing no progressive alternative to the two party setup.

Significantly, the four MPs who had been forced to quit their seats—due to a High Court ruling that they were possibly entitled to citizenship of another country—were returned to parliament. In fact, the reactionary nationalist “dual citizenship” furore created by the media, the political establishment and the High Court over the past

year, was barely mentioned during the protracted by-election campaigns. This suggests that the witch hunt—designed to whip up patriotism and xenophobia—has so far failed to win any substantial popular support.

For Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his government, the most spectacular defeat came in Longman, an electorate that spans outer working-class suburbs and semi-rural areas north of Brisbane, the Queensland state capital. One of the most impoverished electorates in the country, Longman epitomises the worsening social crisis, particularly appallingly low wages and the lack of health and other basic services.

In Longman, the Liberal National Party (LNP) vote crashed by 9.5 percentage points to just 29.5 percent, an historic collapse from almost 45 percent at the 2013 federal election. If that result were replicated at the next federal election, due before May 2019, the government could lose seven seats in Queensland alone, ensuring its defeat.

The Coalition vote was not helped by its choice of candidate, a former minister in the last LNP state government of 2012–15, which slashed health and social spending. But the outcome was a wider rejection of the Turnbull government's economic program, particularly its centrepiece of multi-billion dollar tax cuts for the major banks and other big corporations.

Government ministers had depicted the by-elections as a plebiscite on the tax cut plan, which they have been unable to pass through the Senate. This enabled the Labor Party and its trade union backers to rail demagogically against handouts to the “big banks and multinationals,” in order to tap into the mass social and political disaffection.

However, despite the enormous shift against the government, Labor's vote in Longman rose only 4.6 points to just below 40 percent. This was less than the historical average anti-government swing in by-elections, due to Labor's own anti-working class record in office

and its patently phony rhetoric. Party leader Bill Shorten had backed similar company tax cuts as a key minister in the last Labor government.

As a result, Pauline Hanson's right-wing One Nation party, which sought to exploit social distress in regional areas and divert political hostility into an anti-immigrant, nationalist direction, gained 16 percent of the vote. This was up 6.5 points since the 2016 federal election, although down on the highs of over 20 percent at last November's state election.

A similar, but not quite as dramatic, pattern emerged in Braddon, covering areas of north-western Tasmania, which have been blighted by corporate job destruction and cuts to social services. The Coalition's primary vote fell by 2.5 points to 39 percent, while Labor's also dropped by 3 points to 37 percent. A local fisherman, who depicted himself as an "anti-politician" independent, gained nearly 11 percent of the vote. Labor retained the seat on the back of his second preference votes.

Both major parties suffered a debacle in the semi-rural seat of Mayo, near the South Australian capital of Adelaide. By presenting herself as an alternative to the two-party system, the Centre Alliance candidate garnered 45 percent of the vote, 10 points up from the 2016 election. High-profile Coalition candidate Georgina Downer, daughter of a former party leader and foreign minister, won just 37 percent, down 1 point. Labor got barely 6 percent of the vote—less than the Greens and far below Labor's 25 percent vote in 2010.

In the two Western Australian seats, which the government did not bother to contest, Labor candidates were returned, but only with marginally larger votes. In inner-city Perth, the state capital, Labor's primary vote was just 39.5 percent, up 2 points, and in nearby Fremantle, a once working-class port city, Labor only just won a majority—52 percent, up 11 points.

In these two seats, the Greens picked up 16–18 percent of the vote, largely from disenchanted Coalition voters, but in the more working-class electorates of Longman and Braddon, the Greens vote languished or fell to around 4 percent, expressing growing dissatisfaction towards their orientation to affluent upper-middle class layers, at the direct expense of the interests of the working class.

At the same time, the proportion of people who cast an informal vote, increased from 3.5 percent in Mayo to 9.2 percent in Perth. No statistics are yet available on the numbers who refused to vote at all.

Corporate media commentators voiced alarm at the outcome. Fairfax Media political editor Peter Hartcher

warned this morning of a "great fracturing" and a "subterranean upheaval across Australia's political landscape." Hartcher, the spearhead of a vicious anti-Chinese campaign over the past two years, lamented the fact that voters were "untroubled" that their MPs had been "ineligible to sit in parliament because they were dual citizens."

Most of the commentary focussed on the electoral blow to Turnbull's government. Today's *Australian* editorial declared: "It is brutally clear that the government's political strategy, whatever that is, isn't working. Nationally it has no strategy to deal with Labor's anti-business, class war campaign."

Initial speculation centred on the likelihood that the government would have to drop or modify its company tax cut legislation. This would intensify frustration within the financial elites, with the Coalition seemingly incapable of pushing its agenda through.

In reality, the political crisis is rapidly intensifying. Neither the Coalition nor Labor has been able to form a stable government since the 2008 global financial crash, some 10 years ago.

The latest by-elections portend social and political upheavals, intensified by the potentially disastrous fallout from the Trump administration's trade war measures and a possible meltdown in the property market and banking system.

Turnbull's position as prime minister is under threat, even if he has no immediate challengers. While Shorten's leadership may survive for now, that is only because Labor has made a limited and utterly fraudulent populist appeal to mass anti-establishment sentiment.

Not discussed at all during the by-elections was the bipartisan agenda of alignment with the US in advanced war preparations against China and ongoing austerity to restore the budget to surplus. Nor was any mention made of last week's US-Australia ministerial talks, where Washington insisted on even closer military ties, or of the draconian "foreign interference" laws rammed through parliament late last month, with immense implications for democratic rights.



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