

Far-right Australian senator disbands party in favour of Coalition government

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Right-wing Senator Cory Bernardi announced last week that he would shut down and de-register his two-year-old political party, the Australian Conservatives, following the May 18 election win by the Liberal-National Coalition.

Significantly, Bernardi claimed credit for helping to push the Coalition further to the right, in line with the reactionary program of his party, even though the Australian Conservatives failed miserably in the election.

Bernardi's decision reflects the lack of mass support for far-right outfits like his. But it also underscores the ongoing refashioning of the Coalition, and the entire political establishment, in a right-wing populist direction to try to divert seething social discontent.

Alarmed by growing anti-capitalist sentiment, particularly among young people, Bernardi split from the Coalition to form the Australian Conservatives in February 2017 after returning from a three-month trip to study the 2016 US presidential election.

In media interviews at that time, Bernardi highlighted the support received by the self-proclaimed "socialist" Bernie Sanders. He said polling indicated that "50 percent of young Americans believe socialism or communism is a preferable system to capitalism."

Bernardi vowed to help build a Donald Trump-style populist movement. He sought to emulate Trump's presidential campaign, particularly its demagogic channelling of political disaffection behind nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia.

Bernardi, who pitches to a socially conservative Christian base, has long associated himself with climate change denial, draconian immigration policies, anti-Muslim scare-mongering, anti-abortion campaigns and opposition to same sex marriage.

In the May 18 federal election, however, the Australian Conservatives picked up barely more than 100,000 votes, or 0.70 percent, nationally. That included just over 16,000

votes, or 1.47 percent, in Bernardi's home state of South Australia.

Despite merging with a Pentecostal Christian fundamentalist formation, Family First, in April 2017, the Australian Conservatives lost both its South Australian Legislative Council representatives in 2018 and won only 0.5 percent of the vote in this year's New South Wales state election.

In a statement last Thursday, Bernardi hailed Prime Minister Scott Morrison as a "man of faith and values" who had returned the Coalition to "common sense" policies after ousting Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister via a Liberal party-room coup last August.

For now, Bernardi has ruled out rejoining the Coalition, and will sit in the Senate as an independent. His machinations are part of an unresolved civil war inside the Coalition, driven by the most right-wing elements. Bernardi was a supporter of former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the leader of the Coalition's "hard right" faction. Abbott had been deposed in 2015 by Turnbull, who headed the Liberal Party's "socially progressive" wing.

Bernardi declared: "I do think Scott Morrison has claimed a lot of the territory that was very fertile for the Australian Conservatives. He's a man of faith, he's a relentless campaigner..."

"The inescapable conclusion from our lack of political success, our financial position and the re-election of a Morrison-led government is that the rationale for the creation of the Australian Conservatives is no longer valid... The Morrison government victory and policy agenda suggests we are well on the way to restoring common sense in the Australian parliament."

What exactly are Bernardi's "common sense" policies? Only last September, he moved a bill to ban wearing the burqa, a traditional Muslim garment, in public places. By doing so, Bernardi aligned himself with other anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant formations such as Senator Pauline

Hanson's One Nation and ex-Senator Fraser Anning's Conservative National Party, which openly advocates a revival of the "White Australia" policy that underpinned Federation in 1901.

Acutely aware of the revival of interest in, and support for, a genuine socialist opposition to worsening social inequality, the danger of world war and the shredding of basic democratic rights under capitalism, in October 2017 Bernardi moved a resolution in the Senate denouncing any celebration of the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia.

The motion denounced "any assertion that the teachings of Lenin or Marx should be celebrated in a liberal democracy." It was promptly passed without debate, backed by all the Coalition senators.

In Scott Morrison, an avowed Pentecostal Christian, Bernardi evidently believes his base has found a leader who can combine evangelistic fervour with anti-communism, nationalism and an unconditional commitment to the US military alliance in order to further transform the Coalition along Trump-style, fascistic lines.

Morrison clawed his way up to the Liberal Party leadership by spearheading a military campaign, dubbed "Operation Sovereign Borders," to repel all refugee boats trying to reach Australia. Every aspect of the operation was, and continues to be, shrouded in police-state style secrecy to avoid any public knowledge of its cruelty.

This March, after an Australian fascist massacred Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, Morrison denied any link to the demonising of refugees by himself and the political establishment as a whole. Within days of the atrocity, he sought to further stoke anti-immigrant sentiment by announcing a 15 percent cut in the annual migration intake, falsely blaming immigrants for "congestion" in Australian cities.

Despite media glorification of Morrison as a political genius who pulled off a "miracle" election win, his government is an extremely brittle one. It will have to follow Washington's increasingly aggressive anti-China policy and preparations for war, in the face of widespread anti-war sentiment. Moreover, with the economy sliding into recession, the corporate elite is demanding that the Coalition step up the offensive against workers' conditions and basic social services, which will inevitably trigger explosive working class struggles.

And the factional warfare wracking the Coalition is continuing, with a spate of new media exposures of the government's near implosion during the ousting of Turnbull. Among the revelations is that Morrison himself

triggered Turnbull's removal, while posturing publicly as a loyal supporter.

At the same time, the other old ruling party, the Labor Party, suffered an historic debacle on May 18. Its vote fell to a century-low of 33 percent, continuing a protracted collapse of its working class support over the past 30 years. In response, it is also lurching to the right under new leader Anthony Albanese, who proclaims the party's need to openly embrace "wealth creation" and a closer partnership with big business.

Like their counterparts in the US and across Europe, the traditional social democratic and conservative parties are being decimated. They are widely reviled after decades of imposing declining working and living conditions while enriching a super-wealthy oligarchy of billionaires.

When Bernardi quit the Coalition in 2017 he warned of the disintegration of the Coalition and Labor Party-dominated system that has prevailed since World War II. He told the Senate: "The level of public disenchantment with the major parties, lack of confidence in our political process and concern about the direction of our nation is very strong."

Bernardi's latest manoeuvre shows that the capitalist class's drive toward more authoritarian forms of rule will continue. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned last year, the backroom coup against Turnbull was part of an ongoing effort, backed by sections of the ruling class and the Rupert Murdoch-owned media, to refashion the Liberal-National Coalition into a Trump-style extreme-right-wing movement. The aim is to disorientate sections of the population with nationalism and anti-immigrant fear-mongering, while trying to forge a base of support for US-Australian militarism against China and police-state repression of dissent.

The crucial question for the working class is to break consciously with the Labor Party and its trade union apparatus, and build the SEP in the fight for a workers' government that will implement socialist policies as part of a global working class struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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