

Australia: Liberals strike Queensland election deal with One Nation

By Mike Head
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The breakdown of the post-World War II two-party duopoly in the Australian political establishment reached a new level last week. The Liberal National Party (LNP) awarded its voting preferences in more than half the 93 electorates for the November 25 Queensland state election to the far-right One Nation party.

By assisting Senator Pauline Hanson's xenophobic and anti-immigrant party, the LNP hopes to improve its chances of regaining office by forming a minority government with One Nation's support. Under the preferential voting system, Hanson's party could now win several seats with the aid of LNP preferences.

Fearing an electoral backlash, LNP leader Tim Nicholls has repeatedly ruled out forming a coalition government with One Nation. But he has refused to answer questions about whether the LNP would accept One Nation's support in a de facto coalition.

The decision by the LNP, the state version of the federal Liberal-National Coalition, sets a clear national precedent. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the federal Liberal Party leader, refused to overturn the decision, asserting it was purely a matter for the Queensland LNP.

The reality is that, across the country, popular hostility toward the traditional ruling parties, the Coalition and Labor, has reached such heights that both are increasingly unable to form majority governments. Decades of corporate-driven attacks on the jobs and living conditions of the working class by successive governments have created the political climate in which One Nation and other extreme right-wing populist formations can exploit the disaffection by posturing as anti-establishment parties.

The latest Queensland election opinion poll, conducted on November 13, revealed a further

disintegration of support for the major parties. According to the ReachTEL poll, the LNP's first preference vote fell to 30.8 percent, with Labor on 30.4 percent. These are historic lows.

As a result of this collapse, One Nation is polling 16.4 percent and the Greens 8.1 percent, with other parties and independents pulling 14.3 percent between them. The "other" parties include Katter's Australian Party, another right-wing nationalist and protectionist party established by former LNP cabinet minister Bob Katter.

State Labor Party Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk has declared she would rather go into opposition than form government with One Nation. But she has made no criticism of One Nation's jingoistic and anti-Islamic policies. Instead, she says a LNP-One Nation government would be divided and "chaotic," and only Labor could provide "stable" government for business.

The truth is that Labor is just as likely as the LNP to bid for the support of One Nation and/or Katter's party, whose two MPs helped prop up the minority Labor government during the past three years. In New Zealand last month, the Labour Party formed a coalition government with One Nation's equivalent, the virulently anti-immigrant NZ First party.

During a media-sponsored "leaders' debate" last Thursday, One Nation's Queensland leader Steve Dickson said he was prepared to work with either the LNP or Labor to form the next government. One Nation is evidently looking to play a similar "kingmaker" role as NZ First, whose leader Winston Peters secured the posts of deputy prime minister and foreign minister in his coalition deal with Labour.

However, Dickson, another former LNP cabinet minister, who defected from the LNP in January, may not even hold his seat on the Sunshine Coast, just north

of Brisbane, the state capital.

One Nation's support is concentrated in working-class suburbs to the south and west of Brisbane, and in some rural areas, including mining towns, all of which have been shattered by unemployment and poverty. Like Donald Trump in the US, One Nation is seeking to channel the resulting discontent in reactionary nationalist and "law and order" directions.

One Nation has no solutions for the social crisis, which is the product of the capitalist profit system itself. Its policies, such as slashing welfare, are thoroughly pro-business. However, it cynically exploits the social misery by claiming to oppose the political "elites."

A ReachTEL poll of intending One Nation voters reported that almost 40 percent were retired or unemployed, with about the same percentage living in households trying to make ends meet on less than \$50,000 a year. Only 13 percent said they were motivated by One Nation's policies, while 22.9 percent were determined to "shake things up" and 22.2 percent disliked the major parties.

Above all, Labor's record in office in Queensland and nationally, always in close partnership with the trade unions, has politically opened the door for the re-emergence of One Nation. Hanson's party first came to prominence in 1998, when it won 25 percent of the vote in a Queensland state election by exploiting the deep popular antagonism toward the Labor Party. From 1983 to 1996, under prime ministers Hawke and Keating, Labor and the unions restructured the economy in the interests of the financial elite at the expense of the jobs and conditions of the working class.

In Queensland, Labor premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh mounted a similar assault from 1998 to 2012, which intensified after the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent implosion of the state's mining boom. Multi-billion dollar privatisations destroyed thousands of jobs, with the trade unions again suppressing opposition.

Labor's attacks allowed the LNP to regain office via a 2012 landslide. Reduced to a parliamentary rump, Labor only scraped back into government in 2015 on a negative basis. It benefitted from massive hostility toward that LNP government, in which the LNP's

current leader Nichols was treasurer, after it sacked 14,000 public sector workers and decimated health, education and other essential services.

Over the past three years, Palaszczuk's government has failed to restore most of those cuts, while trying desperately to deliver the requirements of the corporate elite, including by backing the proposed giant Adani coal mine.

Whichever collection of parties forms the next government, it will come under immediate pressure from investors and the financial markets to repudiate any promises of restoring public services. Much of the state has been blighted by the global slump in demand for coal and other mining commodities, underscoring the vulnerability of Australian capitalism to its reliance on mining exports and foreign investment inflows.

Annual construction spending in the resources sector peaked at \$36.6 billion in Queensland in 2013–14, and has since dropped by 70 percent. Unemployment has doubled in the state's northern, central and outback regions, and hovers around 20 percent in large working-class Brisbane suburbs.

This week, the Standard & Poor's financial agency ruled out any restoration of the state's AAA credit rating, which it lost in 2009. The November 17 editorial in Murdoch's *Australian* accused both Labor's Palaszczuk and the LNP's Nicholls of being "cowardly" for refusing to pledge to reduce the state's public debt, which officially stands at \$72 billion and is forecast to exceed \$81 billion by 2020–21.

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