

Australia: Pollsters, pundits shocked by state election result

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A major voter backlash against “economic reforms”, which have vastly exacerbated social inequality, saw the Victorian Liberal-National coalition government's 25-seat majority wiped out in last Saturday's state election. The south-east Australian state's high-profile Premier, Jeff Kennett will spend the next month scrambling to form a government.

The result defied the predictions of pollsters and media pundits and sent shock-waves throughout the entire political establishment.

“Liberal strategists sat back gobsmacked as the results poured in, showing their MPs falling like ninepins,” commented Melbourne's *Age*. “In seat after seat, the coalition was hit by major swings that slashed its huge majority... The superman of Australian politics is now Clark Kent.”

One defeated Liberal MP told the *Age* he was “too stunned to cry”. His loss had left him “totally mystified”. “I just can't believe it.”

Victorian union leaders Leigh Hubbard and Brian Boyd were reportedly “staggered” and “amazed”.

Kennett, acclaimed as Australia's leading “economic reformer” was universally forecast to cruise to an easy victory. Instead he suffered a state-wide anti-government swing of 4.5 percent, and up to 12 percent in rural and regional areas. Health Minister, Rob Knowles—Kennett's anointed successor for the Liberal leadership—was defeated and Housing Minister, Ann Henderson, could lose her seat.

The government's seven-year privatisation and rationalisation program, which has led to the closure of public schools and hospitals throughout the state, was the main cause of the rout. In rural and regional areas, closures have been compounded by a swathe of job cuts in agriculture, primary industry and transport. Banks and post offices have moved out, leaving many country towns bereft of essential services.

In the “bush,” the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposition recorded its best result since 1952, winning 9 former coalition seats. As a result, Labor will hold more regional and country electorates than the Liberals and Nationals combined. In other recent Australian state elections, the far right One Nation party has been the beneficiary of popular anger and resentment towards the major parties. This time, One Nation only managed to field a small number of candidates, winning just 0.31 percent of the vote (a total of 7,869 votes statewide).

The ALP also took back two metropolitan seats: Oakleigh, a working class suburb in Melbourne's south-east, which has a high immigrant population and growing poverty, and Tullamarine, site of a new private tollway, where families will be obliged to pay an extra \$1,500 per year in road tolls. Both seats were won by the Liberals in the anti-Labor landslide of 1992.

Across the state, there was a 2.7 percent swing to Labor. The rest of the anti-government vote benefited rural Independents—up from two to three—who will hold the balance of power in the 88-seat parliament.

Whether the Liberal-National coalition will be able to form a majority government remains unclear. Counting of postal and absentee ballots is still continuing in several seats that remain too close to call. Moreover a supplementary by-election has been called for October 16, due to the

death of the former Liberal MP-turned Independent, in the outer-suburban seat of Frankston East, on the eve of the poll. Commentators now predict that seat is likely to go to Labor, giving the ALP 41 or 42 seats, the coalition 43 or 44 and the Independents three.

Both Kennett and the recently-installed and formerly little-known Labor leader, Steve Bracks, have been attempting, as yet unsuccessfully, to woo the Independents to form a minority government.

The ongoing and unanticipated political uncertainty is creating something of a crisis in ruling circles. Three truckloads of shredded documents left coalition offices at parliament house on Tuesday, prompting threats of police investigation by the ALP. A number of major construction projects, potentially worth billions of dollars, have been left dangling, while outstanding tenders for recently privatised facilities remain in limbo.

The Liberals' partners in the National Party are threatening to quit the coalition, blaming Kennett's arrogant personality and his abandonment of “country people” for the electoral losses and demanding a renegotiation of the coalition agreement.

During the campaign, Kennett gagged his colleagues and banned all political debates, focussing instead on his personal celebrity status. On election night he blamed the result on “overexpectation” of an easy victory and then attacked Victoria's voters, warning that they had made big mistake. By Wednesday, as the extent of the coalition's predicament became clear, he was full of contrition, publicly apologising for having “trodden on toes or offended”.

Editorial writers and analysts have also attributed the result to the Premier's personal style.

“This will go down in history as one of those rare elections where a government's own campaign actually brought it undone,” wrote political and social commentator Hugh Mackay, in a typical example. “To place such single-minded emphasis on “Jeff”... created an impression... of unacceptable arrogance. And arrogance, in Australian politics, is still the cardinal sin.”

In both the leadup and the aftermath to this election, the entire official establishment—journalists, union leaders, politicians, pollsters—has proven utterly incapable of reading the actual state of affairs.

None of them have any comprehension of the impact of Kennett's policies on the lives of ordinary people. Union officials, in their rush to collaborate with privatisation and “international benchmarking”, have become so distant from and opposed to the concerns of their members that they were just as astonished by the result as the Liberals.

The lifestyle enjoyed by the upper middle class—including the trade union bureaucracy and much of the social base of the ALP, centred around the booming CBD—is a world away from the daily grind experienced by the majority in the far western, northern or south-eastern suburbs, and in the bush.

Not only that. The upward movement of the share and property market, on which the “Kennett revolution” and the escalating wealth of the city's

elite has been based, has been predicated upon the continuous destruction of jobs, living standards and working conditions for hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. The privileged minority remains completely indifferent to their plight.

This vast and rapidly widening social gulf was underscored by a column written by Sydney journalist

Paola Totaro, on the eve of the Victorian elections. Entitled "I went, I saw, I was Kennquered", Totaro recounts a recent week-long visit to Melbourne, Victoria's capital city, after which she returned "utterly seduced by... dare I use a Kennettism, its 'confidence'".

"My last memories of Melbourne... were of a city besieged by protests, of angry teachers and depressed public servants, of avenues of empty glass buildings displaying 'Office To Let' signs.

"This time... nothing could dampen my enthusiasm." Cafes, restaurants, bars, new shopping arcades in the CBD, she gushes, summed up the city's revival: "Melbourne, even to the short-term visitor, boasts a new sophistication and that fast-disappearing commodity, quality of life."

The protests to which Totaro refers were suffocated by the ALP and the unions, allowing Kennett to implement his plans with apparent impunity. Beneath the surface, however, social tensions have continued to simmer, erupting, albeit in a somewhat disoriented and confused form, in last Saturday's election.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team interviewed workers in outer suburban areas as they cast their votes.

Kerry Bellchambers, a young worker from Coolaroo in the north-west recounted how she had initially been unemployed after finishing school in 1995.

"[Now] I work at Safeway [a supermarket] part-time for 20 hours a week. I work whenever they call me in. Last week I got less than \$300 on adult wages.

"What's the point of voting for the ALP? They're trying to be just like Liberal... Voting is just a chore.

"My parents work at General Motors Holden. They aren't too sure about their jobs. They may have to move to Adelaide [in South Australia] as 2,000 jobs are at risk. My dad has been there for twenty years. For young people, what the future holds, I have no idea... Young people can't get jobs, and they don't know what will happen.

George Athanasiou, also from Coolaroo, has worked at the Nestle's factory for more than 10 years, and his wife works at Ford. In 1996 George participated in a strike that was isolated and defeated by the union bureaucracy.

" Since the strike, there is no union in Nestle's, the workers have no rights. The workers cannot defend themselves. Everybody is scared, that is it. Of course, the union is there only in name. We pay the unions to do nothing.

"What I am worried about is the young people, our children. They have no future to look to—they have no permanent jobs, only casual work. How would it be possible for them to have a family or to build a house? It is impossible for them.

"When I started at Nestle's there were more than 1,000 workers, now there are only 350 left. They use more casuals, more part-time workers. That is why it affects the next generation so badly. The same is happening at Fords, where my wife has worked for 11 years. This same thing is happening in every country of the world. This is the situation. When the workers are scared, they don't unite, but they need to.

"Who votes for the Liberals? I can see some in the factory who are very confused, and who accept the claims of the Liberals. And the Labor party is the same. Hawke [former Labor Prime Minister] started all these decisions to cut the conditions of workers. I remember when he came to our factory. It was Hawke's idea to start cutting down jobs. Where do workers go? Independent? You can't trust anybody. Myself, I voted Labor. If you've got two bad things, you vote for the less bad. I get less pain with

them."

John Bustos, a medical student from Hampton Park in the city's far south-east, said that education was the most important issue.

"Education is all over the place and students will be suffering in the future as a result of a lack of leadership in government. Last election I voted for Kennett. Kennett closed more schools than what he opened. Kennett has gone nowhere with his policies on education. Everything they did has ruined the education system. I can't believe how bad it has become since the Liberals have been in power."

Childcare worker, Marion Collins, spoke of her experiences under the Liberal government.

"Most of the government run [child care centres] were forced to close down when Kennett got in, because the government cut their funding. This is why many of the child-care centres had to go private. To survive, one centre had to get rid of its cook, parents had to bring in their own food for the kids. Many just got shut down"

"I could hear people behind me on the polling booth saying 'this is stupid, why do we have to vote'. People feel very upset by the fact that promises are broken. I can understand why they don't want to vote. Working people's voice won't be represented if Liberal gets in, seeing hospitals and schools shut down, and more privatisation will be carried out.

"I've been back in child care for the last 15 months, working part-time and full-time, but prior to that I was unemployed for three years. Seeing the whole social security system change has been incredible.

"People are turning to crime because of the lack of jobs, turning to drugs because they have nothing to do—it is a vicious circle.

"If you don't vote for Labor, the question is where do you go? Do you not vote and risk the fine? What is the alternative? In the child care struggle, I tried to convince the girls at work that their jobs were on the line. I told them 'are you going to join us, take a stand and go on TV?' I tried to tell them that it will make a difference if they do something. I think the more that working people take a stand and oppose what the government does, the more our voices can be expressed."

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A political comment

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