

Media and business back Australian Labor Party in Queensland state election

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16 February 2001

Voters in the northern Australian state of Queensland will go the polls this Saturday after Labor Party Premier Peter Beattie called a snap election late last month, allowing only 25 days for campaigning. This will be the second state election in a week, following the ousting of Richard Court's Liberal-National government in Western Australia last Saturday.

Like his erstwhile West Australian counterpart, Beattie called the poll as soon as possible in the New Year and gave little time for political debate. The Queensland election was not due until May or June, and Beattie had previously made a commitment to serving a full three-year term. He was driven to the polls early, however, by a series of scandals involving senior members of his government: first child sex charges, then high-level corruption allegations, and finally systematic electoral fraud.

By the time Beattie called the election, at least 18 senior Labor MPs and officials, both state and federal, as well as key trade union bureaucrats, had been named or implicated in the falsification of electoral rolls by Labor's faction leaders to win ALP pre-selection ballots. The affair, which first broke last August, revealed the inner rot and decay of the ALP over the past two decades. Having lost any genuine mass base of support in the working class, the party has become nothing more than a vehicle for faction bosses and careerists, with pre-selections often hinging on the false electoral enrolment of handfuls of party staff members or faction supporters.

By setting February 17 as the date, Beattie pre-empted the release of a Criminal Justice Commission inquiry report into the vote rigging. He also avoided recalling parliament to discuss the forced departure of three MPs who had confessed to involvement, including Deputy Premier Jim Elder and high profile former state ALP secretary Mike Kaiser. Their resignations left Beattie without a majority in parliament.

The so-called "rorts affair"—given great prominence by the state and national mass media—also became a means by which ruling circles demanded that the ALP be purged of nepotism, factional horse-trading and trade union influence. Business leaders want a party that can more directly and reliably deliver ongoing economic restructuring.

Beattie immediately set about meeting their demands by declaring that he was determined to clean up the ALP, even if it meant sacrificing his government. He has been afforded overwhelmingly favourable media coverage ever since. Despite the fact that he was ALP state secretary for much of the 1980s, when most of the Labor Party ballot rigging took place, the media has portrayed him as a courageous reformer.

Before announcing the election date, Beattie staged a 12-day "listening tour" around the state, ostensibly asking voters their advice on when to go to the polls. The tour featured such media stunts as donning a wetsuit to swim with sharks in an aquarium tank, hugging a piglet in a shopping centre and donning hard hats on construction sites.

Beattie's decision to go to the polls early was then endorsed by the media proprietors, particularly Rupert Murdoch, who owns Brisbane's only daily newspaper, the *Courier-Mail* as well as the national *Australian*. According to the *Australian's* Queensland political reporter: "In the end,

Peter Beattie had no choice but to take Queenslanders to the polls... Now Queenslanders are demanding political certainty."

This appeal for "certainty" has become a central theme of Beattie's re-election bid. He formally launched Labor's campaign on February 7 with the claim that only his government could deliver stability and leadership. Unless Labor won a clear majority, he warned, Queensland would be left with an unstable Liberal-National Coalition government depending on the support of minor parties.

Today's *Australian* emphasised its support for Beattie on the front page and in an editorial that commented: "Queenslanders know they require a leader with experience who can deliver a workable, stable government to pursue state and regional interests... The *Australian* recommends a vote for Labor."

Deep concerns have been expressed in ruling circles about the inability of both Labor and the Coalition to form a secure government in Queensland since the mid-1990s, when the seven-year Labor government of Wayne Goss was dumped from office. From 1996 to 1998, National Party leader Rob Borbidge headed a minority Coalition government, propped up in parliament by three independent MPs.

In the last Queensland election in June 1998, the political establishment was delivered a rude shock when nearly 30 percent of the vote went to Independent and minor parties, including the extreme right-wing One Nation headed by Pauline Hanson. Beattie formed a minority government after winning only 38.8 percent of the primary vote, while the Liberal and National parties were reduced to a rump, polling just 31 percent between them. Beattie's government secured a bare one-seat majority in the 89-member parliament in December 1998 after a One Nation MP resigned, but it has now lost one seat through an electoral redistribution.

In an effort to scrape back into office, Beattie has distanced himself as far as he can from the discredited ALP apparatus by running a presidential-style campaign, featuring his own personal web site and advertisements that bury all references to the party. His web site declares: "I have called an election for February 17 to clear the air and give certainty to Queensland."

Beattie has also tried to minimise the protest and One Nation vote by urging voters, particularly Labor voters, to cast a primary vote only and not allocate preferences to other candidates. This is permitted under Queensland's optional preferential voting system, unlike Western Australia and most other states where the allocation of preferences to all candidates is compulsory.

At the same time, Beattie has opportunistically exploited the deeply felt hostility toward the federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, particularly over last year's imposition of the 10 percent Goods and Services Tax, increases in fuel excise and the drive to further privatise Telstra, the former government-owned telecommunications provider.

Deteriorating living standards

One of the most striking features of the campaign, however, has been

that neither Beattie nor the Coalition has mentioned or attempted to address the deteriorating living standards and social conditions of working people.

Unemployment in outer Brisbane and in the central and northern regions of the state is up to three times higher than the official national figure of 6.7 percent, which itself underestimates the true situation by about half. Across the state, the official level is 8.2 percent, the second highest of any state.

More than 26,000 people are on Queensland public housing waiting lists and nearly 25 percent of the state's people rent rather than own their homes, the highest proportion in the country. Queensland has the second highest rate of homelessness in Australia, but has the second-lowest level of funding for the homeless, forcing agencies to turn away up to 9 out of 10 people seeking shelter.

Studies compiled by the Queensland Council of Social Services show that, as a result of state and federal government policies, spending on social welfare, housing, health and education in the state is \$600 million a year below the national average. The result is long public hospital waiting lists, overcrowded and run-down government schools, under-funded social services and a worsening housing crisis.

Rural and regional areas—where more than 50 percent of Queensland's people live—have been devastated by closures of banks and essential facilities, agricultural deregulation and farming bankruptcies. These areas are now listed as some of the poorest in Australia.

While condemning the Howard government, Beattie's main attack on the Coalition parties has been that they have made too many promises in the fields of health, education and welfare, accusing them of endangering the state's budget surplus.

On health, for example, he has promised to spend just \$20 million over two years to reduce surgery waiting lists, far less even than the Coalition, which has pledged \$132 million over four years—itsself a drop in the bucket compared to the annual state health budget of \$3.8 billion. On jobs, Labor has merely pledged \$5.5 million over three years to subsidise low-wage employers. On education, Beattie has offered just \$50 million over three years to repair schools and \$132 million to hire 800 extra teachers.

By contrast, Labor will spend far more to further boost the police and criminalise the victims of the social divide. It will employ 1,000 more police, on top of the 836 extra it has already deployed, establish police flying squads for so-called “high crime” areas, allocate \$30 million for new police stations and empower judges to publicly name juveniles committed of serious offences.

For his part, Opposition leader Borbidge has echoed US President George Bush in calling for “compassionate” conservatism, but offered no new initiatives except mandatory prison terms for housebreaking and some sexual offences.

The media has depicted Borbidge and his Liberal Party deputy David Watson as political corpses, headed for certain defeat. Media polls show support for Borbidge at a dismal 16 percent, compared to 60 percent for Beattie. Borbidge has already committed himself to resign if he loses the election and two of his shadow ministers are openly jockeying for his position.

Borbidge's leadership was effectively neutered early in the campaign when a majority of National Party MPs defied his call for Hanson's One Nation to be placed last on National Party how-to-vote cards. Fearing electoral oblivion, 17 National MPs have sought preference-swapping deals with Hanson's party. While such agreements may pull them over the line, or perhaps secure seats for One Nation candidates, they are likely to further decimate the Liberal vote in Brisbane, where many of the Liberals' middle class constituents object to Hanson's racist and xenophobic outlook.

Hanson's party obtained 22.7 percent of the vote in the 1998 election and, assisted by National Party preference swaps, won 11 seats in

parliament. Since then, One Nation has imploded amid factional infighting, discontent with Hanson's despotic internal regime and witchhunting by the state authorities, culminating in deregistration as a political party in late 1999. By the end of 1999, all 11 of its MPs had quit, become Independents or joined the breakaway City Country Alliance.

One Nation will run 39 candidates in this election, having been re-registered on the same day that Beattie announced the poll date. Puffed up by her near-10 percent vote in last weekend's WA election and the constant media attention lavished on her ever since, Hanson has run a last-minute campaign that largely consists of urging a protest vote against Howard and Beattie. “I'm not there to keep the bastards honest,” she declared at her campaign launch on Wednesday night. “I'm there to get rid of the bastards.”

Unlike her campaign in WA, however, where she issued no policy statements at all, Hanson has released a booklet listing her reactionary policies: stop immigration, abolish Aboriginal native title of land, force refugee boats to turn around, hold a referendum on restoring capital punishment, etc. Particularly in the devastated rural areas and among older voters, she seeks to channel disenchantment and despair in an extreme right-wing direction.

Altogether, 360 candidates are contesting the 89 electorates, creating a volatile mixture of Independents, local candidates, One Nation and City Country Alliance.

The Greens and Australian Democrats are also promoting themselves as outlets for anti-government protest, while not in any way challenging the profit system. With the Democrats discredited by having assisted the Howard government to introduce the GST, the Greens have declared that they hope to hold the balance of power in parliament.

The Greens have sought to attract alienated Labor and Liberal voters by nominating three key issues: “major party corruption”, failure to provide basic services and environmental degradation. Their web site accuses Beattie and the ALP of having “betrayed their true believers with the party elite's disregard for the rules and go-getting careerism”. Nevertheless, the Greens have allocated preferences to the ALP in critical marginal seats, demonstrating their underlying support for the official political framework.

According to the latest media polls, Beattie is headed for victory, scoring 43 percent support compared to just 29 percent for the Coalition. But this still leaves nearly 30 percent going to other parties, including 12 percent for One Nation. Moreover the polls have repeatedly failed in recent elections to detect the size of the minor party vote, an indication of the hostility building up to the polls—and the newspapers that publish them—themselves. While the media has focused solely on One Nation since the WA poll, these figures indicate wider social discontent that will only deepen after the election.



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