

Another landslide election loss for Australian conservative parties

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The Australian Labor Party will form a government in the Northern Territory for the first time in 27 years after the Country Liberal Party (CLP) administration suffered a swing against it of more than 9 percent in last Saturday's Territory election.

Defeated Chief Minister Denis Burke, who had confidently called the election just a month earlier, went to the polls with his party enjoying a commanding parliamentary majority, holding 17 seats to Labor's seven, alongside one independent.

Moreover, the CLP had never come close to losing power since the self-governing Territory's first election in 1974. The Labor Party had never held more than nine seats in the 25-member parliamentary chamber and had not won a seat from the CLP since 1980.

Yet last Saturday the CLP lost most of its urban seats, and is likely to be left with only 10 seats to Labor's 13, with two independents (counting is continuing in one seat, but Labor is ahead). Burke is expected to resign today, allowing Labor to take office, either with a one-seat majority or as a minority administration depending on the votes of an independent.

The outcome continues a trend that has seen the defeat of one government after the other in Australia over the past six months. Long-standing conservative administrations have been ousted in landslide results in every state, except South Australia, where the Olsen government is now attempting to delay a poll due in October. At the last federal election in 1998, the Liberal-National Party government of Prime Minister John Howard barely survived.

Despite the unprecedented shift away from the CLP, however, Labor's primary vote only rose by 2.1 percent. Aided by preference votes from independents and because of the vagaries of the preferential voting system, Labor is set to form a government after polling just 40.6 percent of the vote, compared to 45.6 percent for the CLP.

Labor's only substantial gains occurred in the middle class northern suburbs of Darwin, the Territory's capital. Traditional CLP voters—small business people, self-

employed contractors, wealthier professional layers—deserted Burke. Labor's vote increased by an average of 10 percent in these seats, with the highest swing of 11.5 percent in the north Darwin electorate of Sanderson.

By contrast, Labor's vote declined and many voters stayed away from the polls in poorer and predominantly Aboriginal areas. In the two northern seats of Arafura and Nhulunbuy, both with large Aboriginal populations, Labor's vote fell by 5.9 percent and 6.7 percent respectively. In MacDonnell, a rural seat covering the entire Territory south of Alice Springs, voter turnout was less than 50 percent, allowing the sitting CLP member to claim victory.

Independent candidates benefitted from the antipathy toward both major parties, obtaining nearly 11 percent, double their previous tally. The extreme right-wing and racist One Nation party of Pauline Hanson, which has exploited this disaffection in recent state elections, received only 1.3 percent of the vote, indicating little support for its anti-Asian, anti-Aboriginal and anti-welfare stance.

Prime Minister Howard desperately claimed that the CLP's defeat was due simply to "local issues" and the "it's time" factor affecting a 27-year-old government. But the underlying issues were the same as in every election over the past decade—hostility to privatisation and other pro-market policies, the deterioration of health, education and other basic social services, declining living standards and worsening economic insecurity.

Burke himself punctured Howard's argument by blaming the impact of the federal government's 10 percent Goods and Services Tax (GST), introduced last year. By imposing a wide-ranging consumption tax, while slashing corporate and personal income taxes, the Howard government has further shifted the tax burden from the wealthy to the working people, as well as creating an administrative nightmare for many small businesses in collecting the tax.

Even the so-called local features of the Northern Territory election reflected the wider political issues. In particular, the results were a rejection of the Burke government's aggressive defence of its reactionary "mandatory

sentencing” policy, under which all people convicted of minor property offences are automatically jailed, and the CLP’s decision to allocate voting preferences to One Nation. These two issues took centre-stage in the CLP’s campaign, in a transparent attempt by Burke and his ministers to divert growing hostility over social conditions and living standards into a “law and order” witchhunt, primarily directed against the Territory’s poorest and most vulnerable people—Aborigines. These efforts backfired.

Political shift

At the same time, the voting patterns point to a transfer of political allegiance from the CLP to the Labor Party among more affluent social layers, responding to a further shift to the right by the Labor leadership. Like her Labor counterparts in state governments around the country, the Labor Party’s Northern Territory leader Clare Martin is an avowedly pro-business, “law and order” politician.

In one candid comment, Amanda Vanstone, the Howard government’s Family and Community Services Minister, welcomed Martin’s victory as a “good thing for women” while lamenting that Martin was “in the wrong party”. Martin epitomises the new Labor leadership, which is even more dedicated to “market reforms” and reducing social spending than the conservatives.

During the election campaign, Martin assiduously courted business leaders, who donated substantial sums to Labor’s funds. She attacked the Burke government for overspending, increasing the Territory government’s debt and allocating government contracts to CLP supporters. She promised to replace CLP cronyism with a more transparent administration better suited to the requirements of big business.

Just before the election, she removed Aboriginal MP John Ah Kit as Labor’s shadow minister on mines and energy, after he made remarks considered too critical of the mining companies that, together with pastoral interests, dominate the Territory economy.

In the same vein, she criticised the CLP’s mandatory sentencing policy as “tactically incorrect” and for failing to reduce crime rates—proposing to boost the police force instead. Petty offenders will still be imprisoned under Labor’s alternative regime of “mandatory punishment”. Labor will give magistrates and judges some discretion over jailing offenders, but there will be a presumption in favour of imprisonment unless “extenuating circumstances” can be shown to exist.

One of the major concerns of corporate Australia was that the CLP’s pandering to anti-Asian and anti-Aboriginal sentiment jarred with the image needed to develop Darwin—Australia’s northernmost city—as a gateway to Asia. Particularly since the 1999 Australian intervention into East

Timor, Darwin has become a commercial hub for activity in the region.

The city is the proposed site for major processing and pipeline construction plants, drawing on the substantial oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea, and this year the Howard government gave the final go-ahead for a Darwin to Alice Springs railroad, establishing a north-south freight route.

Rupert Murdoch’s national flagship, the *Australian*, articulated these concerns in an election eve editorial calling for a Labor vote. It described the election as crucial for “Australia’s great economic frontier... whose potential is nowhere being fulfilled”. Decades of CLP rule had “created cronyism that runs from the Chief Minister’s office, through the public service, all the way down to local communities”. It reassured its readers that “Ms Martin is probably more pro-development than Mr Burke, free of his CLP cronyism and just as tough on crime without resorting to offensive mandatory sentencing laws”.

Throughout the mass media and official political circles, the CLP defeat was greeted with shock and disbelief. “Perhaps what all the rest of us can learn—from this and other recent state and by-election results—is that these days we should expect the unexpected,” the *Melbourne Age* stated in an editorial. “The 9 percent swing to Labor in the NT was expected by few except the most optimistic of Labor supporters. It was certainly not expected by the Labor leader—and, at this stage, Mr Burke’s likely successor—Clare Martin.”

The degree of surprise, in the face of a similar pattern in one election after another over the past three years, demonstrates yet again the yawning gulf between journalists, politicians and the official political establishment from the lives and aspirations of ordinary working people.

Thus far, the sense of alienation and hostility towards the old parties and their pro-market programs has taken the limited and confused parliamentary form of support for various independents and third parties. But the mounting electoral volatility throughout the country indicates the growth of profound social tensions which will erupt in more direct forms in the coming period.



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