

A blow to Australian Prime Minister: State Liberal leader deposed

Mike Head
1 April 2002

Liberal Party opponents of Australian Prime Minister John Howard scored a victory last week by deposing one of his closest protégés, Kerry Chikarovski, as party leader in Howard's home state of New South Wales. Only four days after Howard addressed the Liberals' state convention, and emphasised his "total support" for Chikarovski, she was replaced by a previously little-known MP, John Brogden, who turned just 33 the same day.

In a secret ballot, the party's 29 upper and lower house MPs voted for Brogden, but only by the narrowest margin—15 to 14—demonstrating that the Liberals remain faction-riddled. Before the vote Howard encouraged Chikarovski, who is closely identified with his right-wing faction, to refuse to stand aside, while former state Premier Nick Greiner, now a leading company director, publicly backed Brogden, declaring that the business community had written off Chikarovski as ineffective.

It seems that Brogden had planned his surprise coup for many months but chose his timing carefully. He and his parliamentary supporters confronted Chikarovski one day after the convention, which was supposed to launch the party's campaign for the next state election, due in one year's time. Under Chikarovski's leadership, the Liberals were widely regarded as unelectable. Opinion polls published days earlier indicated only 15 percent support for Chikarovski among voters in key marginal electorates.

Before making his move, Brogden stitched up a deal between his "small l liberal" associates and a right-wing Liberal Party sub-faction led by Chris Hartcher. Hartcher agreed to serve as Brogden's deputy, putting aside his own ambitions to replace Chikarovski.

But the most important factor in the timing was the political sidelining of federal Senator Bill Heffernan, Howard's right-hand man in the New South Wales party leadership. Heffernan was forced to resign as Howard's cabinet secretary after falsely accusing High Court Justice Michael Kirby, a self-declared homosexual, of "trawling for sex" in one of Sydney's red light districts.

To avoid further fallout from the affair, Heffernan stayed away from the party convention and was thus unable to play his usual role snooping for Howard. Brogden reportedly told his friends that Heffernan's absence cleared the way for the

challenge.

The weakening of Howard's grip over the party was highlighted two days before the state convention. One of Brogden's backers, businessman and former state minister Michael Yabsley, who heads the party's corporate fundraising arm, the Millennium Forum, wrote to Heffernan demanding that he resign from the Senate. If not, the party had little hope of raising the \$4 million it needed in corporate donations to finance its state election campaign.

Howard immediately sprang to Heffernan's defence, declaring that the senator had already paid a "heavy penalty" for his mistaken attack on Kirby. By contrast, Treasurer Peter Costello, who has positioned himself as Howard's successor, said it was up to Heffernan to consider his future.

The Heffernan affair is just one of the major scandals to hit Howard since federal parliament resumed in February. It followed revelations that government ministers falsely accused refugees of throwing children overboard during last November's federal election, that Howard's handpicked appointee as governor-general, Anglican Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, covered up sexual abuse of children within the church, and that former Health Minister Michael Wooldridge diverted \$5 million from health programs to an organisation which later appointed him as a consultant.

To some extent, Brogden's challenge became a vehicle for the anti-Howard forces in Sydney's corporate elite. According to media reports, "leading figures in the Sydney business community" backed Brogden. A high-profile PR firm, Cannings, orchestrated his media appearances. His supporters let it be known that "the big end of town" was adamant that Chikarovski be removed.

Media owners left no doubt about their preference. The Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* urged the Liberals to test "new blood," pointing to Chikarovski's rejection by "corporate Sydney". An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* called Brogden's move "a slap in the face for Mr Howard... the state Libs are struggling with unconvincing leaders, a shrinking membership and narrow support base. Mr Brogden's emergence is a backlash against that."

Right-wing radio talkback hosts Alan Jones and John Laws, both closely identified with Howard, vehemently championed

Chikarovski, ridiculing Brogden as a political lightweight with a slick PR campaign. However, their efforts to galvanise support for Chikarovski failed.

Brogden's elevation is the latest attempt by the NSW Liberals to fashion a leadership capable of imposing the requirements of big business on an increasingly alienated electorate. According to one media columnist, Brogden follows the mould of Greiner and John Fahey, premiers from 1988 to 1995, who combined "economic dryness" with "social liberalism".

Greiner took office after the previous Labor government suffered a landslide defeat. Arm-in-arm with the federal Labor governments of Hawke and Keating, the NSW Labor government had begun to enforce wholesale economic restructuring—decimating jobs and conditions—culminating in its assault on the workers' compensation scheme for injured employees.

Greiner's image as a social progressive rapidly disintegrated. His government destroyed thousands of teachers' jobs, launched the privatisation of public services and renewed the assault on workers' compensation and basic rights, arousing massive popular opposition. He was forced to resign in a 1992 scandal, leaving his deputy Fahey to face defeat at the hands of the current Labor Premier Bob Carr in 1995.

After the 1995 election, Fahey was replaced by Peter Collins, a leader of the Liberals' "small l" faction, who has now thrown his weight behind Brogden. In December 1998, however, just weeks before the last state election in March 1999, Howard personally backed a leadership coup by Chikarovski, declaring himself as her "long-term friend and admirer".

In late 1998, Howard was at the height of his influence inside the party, having just clung to office in the October federal election. Chikarovski was installed, based on Howard's "social conservative" political platform of law and order, Christian fundamentalism and free market de-regulation. This was part of a bid by Howard's faction to appeal to the layers who had deserted the Liberal party for Pauline Hansen's extreme right-wing One Nation party in the federal election.

Chikarovski went to the polls seeking to combine social conservatism with a commitment to pursue the economic agenda demanded by big business. She advocated jailing youth for first-time graffiti offences and locking up children found on the streets at night. As well, she pledged to sell the state's electricity grid for an estimated \$25 billion, at the cost of thousands of jobs, in order to pay off debts owed to the financial markets. Despite offering voters \$1,000 apiece if the plan went ahead, her promise proved deeply unpopular.

The outcome was a disastrous defeat. While Labor polled only 42 percent of the primary vote—its third lowest NSW result in half a century—it retained office because the Liberal-National Party coalition vote plummeted from 44 percent in 1995 to 34 percent. The Liberals' share fell to 24 percent, their worst vote in NSW since the party was founded in 1944.

Despite deepening hostility toward Carr's right-wing Labor regime, Chikarovski's opinion poll results never recovered—her rating as preferred premier stayed at or below 19 percent during the next three years. She continued to focus on law and order issues, attacking the Laborites for allegedly going soft on "crime," demanding more police and longer jail terms, only to lose a series of by-elections.

An MP for only six years, Chikarovski's replacement is an untested novice, the youngest Liberal state leader ever. But Brogden's youthful image is, in fact, his main marketing asset. With just 29 MPs, most of them discredited factional hacks, the Liberals no doubt regard his lack of a political track record as a distinct advantage.

Pro-business elements within the Liberal Party have groomed Brogden as a future state leader since his early 20s. He was installed in the blue-ribbon Sydney north shore seat of Pittwater at a 1996 by-election with the help of federal party president John Valder, another leading business figure, who reportedly bent party rules and twisted arms to do so.

In the lead-up to his leadership challenge, Brogden projected a socially progressive image, espousing republicanism, sexual tolerance, drug law reform and multiculturalism. While still insisting he remains a "pragmatic, mainstream Liberal," his stance is directed against the parochial, backward-looking and rural-based constituency cultivated by Howard. Brogden's base is "global Sydney"—the finance capital of Australia—whose international interests have been undermined by Howard's promotion of xenophobia.

In his first media interviews, Brogden has spoken of extending Greiner's corporatisation of government facilities and imposition of "user pays" fees. To overcome public opposition to outright privatisation, he has pointed to British Prime Minister Tony Blair's so-called private-public partnership model, where basic services such as public housing, schools, hospitals, trains and roads are handed over to corporate investors, without selling off the underlying infrastructure.

With an eye on the coming election, Brogden is being carefully marketed as a working class boy made good. Given the defeats suffered by previous governments, Labor and Liberal alike, his backers are anxious to manufacture broader political support.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact