

Prime Minister's party reduced to a rump in Australian state election

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On the surface, media predictions of a “Labor landslide” were fulfilled last Saturday, when Premier Steve Bracks, who previously ruled with the support of independents, was returned with an unprecedented majority in elections in Victoria, Australia’s second most populous and most industrialised state. Despite winning less than half the vote—48.3 percent—Labor will hold at least 60 of the 88 seats in the lower house and will control the upper house for a full term of government for the first time.

Labor’s electoral victory, however, was achieved largely by default, through a dramatic collapse in support for the Liberals, the main Opposition party in the state and the party headed nationally by Prime Minister John Howard. The Liberal Party recorded its second lowest vote in history, only 33.8 percent—a swing of 8.42 percent. It has lost more than half its 35 lower house seats and will end up with a rump of 15-17 MPs, depending on the final count in several electorates.

At least six Liberal frontbenchers have fallen, including shadow ministers for transport Geoff Leigh, local government Leonie Burke, health Ron Wilson, small business Wendy Smith, community services Lorraine Elliott and sports and youth affairs Ian Cover. The party is in disarray, marked by bitter factional recriminations. Robert Doyle, who was installed only three months before the election, was reelected as party leader but is likely to face challenges in the near future.

The Liberal debacle follows that of their former coalition partners, the rural-based National Party, which was left with just six seats after the last state election in 1999. This time, the National vote slipped slightly to a new low of 4.48 percent, but because of the vagaries of the preferential voting system, the party picked up one seat, giving it seven. The Nationals, who are Howard’s federal coalition partners, clung to their vote by publicly distancing themselves from the Liberals, refusing to sign a new partnership agreement.

Despite the Liberal rout, Labor’s primary vote only rose by 2.82 percent. Its greatest gains occurred in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, the state capital. Predominantly middle class electorates such as Forest Hill, Doncaster and Eltham, saw swings to Labor of over 10 percent, more than three times the state average. Conservative Liberal voters, who had backed the previous premier, Jeff Kennett, and his program of drastic economic restructuring at the last election, switched to Labor.

Bracks defeated Kennett at the 1999 election by capitalising on the broad hostility to the Liberal government which had made deep

inroads into public health, education and other social services and destroyed thousands of jobs. The result, which came as a complete shock to the media and the political establishment, left the Liberal Party in disarray.

Over the past three years, the Bracks government has proven its willingness to maintain and enforce these cutbacks, even if forced to make some concessions, restoring about one-third of the public sector jobs eliminated under the Liberals. With Labor implementing its agenda, the Liberal Party was left with virtually nothing to campaign on. As a result, with the media pushing for a majority Labor government, former Kennett supporters saw no reason to vote Liberal and instead they fell in behind Bracks.

By contrast, the government’s vote fell sharply in some traditional Labor seats, including older working class and inner city areas. While the mass media trumpeted a “Brackslide,” the Premier suffered a 1.51 percent fall in his inner-western electorate of Williamstown. Throughout inner Melbourne, home to older immigrant and other working class families, as well as professionals and students, Labor’s vote fell by up to 12 percent in heartland seats such as Richmond, Brunswick and Northcote.

Most of these votes went to the Greens, whose tally increased from just over 1 percent statewide in 1999 to 9.17 percent, representing nearly one third of a million votes. In four inner Melbourne electorates, the Greens won more than 20 percent, outpolling the Liberals. Their highest vote—27.4 percent—was recorded in Richmond. In the seat of Melbourne, the Green candidate almost toppled Community Services Minister Bronwyn Pike. In the end, however, no Green candidate won enough votes to obtain a seat.

In a number of electorates, both urban and rural, independents also polled strongly, and two of the three sitting independent MPs held their seats with substantially increased margins. Altogether, the vote for candidates opposed to the traditional parties—Labor, Liberal and Nationals—almost doubled from about 7 percent in 1999 to 13.5 percent; an indication of growing alienation from official politics.

Yet, the Australian Democrats, which has functioned as a “third party” of the political establishment for the past 25 years, saw its vote shrivel, from 0.3 percent to 0.1 percent. Its support has plunged nationally since it assisted the Howard government to introduce the GST consumption tax in 1998. Moreover, whereas the extreme right-wing Pauline Hanson One Nation Party captured a sizeable portion of the vote against the major parties in recent

state elections, notably last year in Queensland and Western Australia, the group did not stand in Victoria, after having obtained less than 1 percent in 1999.

The Green vote, albeit in a confused and somewhat contradictory way, expressed an underlying shift to the left by layers of working people, students and professionals. The Greens carefully positioned themselves to appeal to those alienated by Bracks' continuation of Kennett's program, by advocating the restoration of a range of social programs, including the replacement of the thousands of teachers removed by Kennett.

At the same time, they sought to divert the prevailing sentiment of disaffection in a parochial direction, campaigning against local real estate developments to the exclusion of broader issues. The Greens dropped virtually all mention of their opposition to the impending war on Iraq, as well the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, avoiding any criticism of Labor's support for Howard's policy on both issues.

Nevertheless, as interviews given to the WWSW confirmed, many who voted for the Greens did so not simply on the basis of local or Victorian issues but because they saw the opportunity to register their opposition to the bi-partisan support of Liberal and Labor for war and anti-refugee measures at the national level. The anti-establishment sentiment of those who voted for Greens is in sharp contrast to the party's commitment to operating within the ambit of official politics and the existing social order.

There are already indications that the Greens are seeking to transform their growing electoral support into a future place in government. In this election, given the likelihood of a Labor victory, Green preferences were directed to Labor, delivering a swag of seats to Labor, translating the small increase in its primary vote into an electoral triumph. National Green leader, Tasmanian Senator Bob Brown, quickly congratulated Labor on its victory.

In the course of the election campaign, big business and the media overtly supported the return of a majority Bracks government. Corporate funds to the Liberals campaign coffers dropped sharply. The day before the poll, all the editorials, including those in staunchly conservative newspapers, came out in support of Labor. Above all, the aim was for a Bracks government that was not reliant on independents or the Greens for a majority, and, therefore, less inclined to soften the economic restructuring.

Having won a huge majority and faced with the prospect of an economic downturn, the Bracks government will now be under strong pressure to implement the demands of big business. As soon as the election was over, media editorials urged Bracks to use his domination of both houses of parliament to do more to suppress militant workers and slash labour costs. Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* called for a "crackdown on union thugs" in order to "restore the state's open-for-business sign," adding "Mr Bracks should use his position of strength to put his foot down".

The *Australian Financial Review* declared that the big test facing Bracks was how he reconciled the unrealistic aspirations of the his supporters with the need for "fiscal prudence". The editorial specifically demanded that Labor abandon its promised industrial manslaughter bill, which had been blocked in the upper house by the Liberals. The Bill would have made company directors liable for some of the deaths and injuries they cause to workers.

Labor acceded to this request the next day, giving the clearest indication of his government's intentions to step up its pro-business policies. The *Financial Review* immediately welcomed the decision as "a good start for Mr Bracks". At the same time, like his counterparts in other states and at the federal level, Bracks is boosting police powers and undermining basic democratic rights, under the cover of fighting terrorism. One of the government's first pieces of legislation will be to authorise police to covertly enter and search homes and offices.

Having already worked with Bracks to contain the hostility to Kennett's social devastation and allow big business to axe thousands of full-time jobs, the union leaders have moved just as swiftly to assure the government of their support. Australian Workers Union national and Victorian secretary Bill Shorten said he wanted to "sound a note of caution against extreme union claims".

The Victorian result highlights the narrow base of the Howard government, belying the media polls indicating that Howard enjoys overwhelming popular support. Howard and some of his ministers, notably Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott, campaigned prominently alongside Doyle. The crushing defeat is the latest in a series of disasters for the Liberal and National parties at every state and territory election since 1998. In several key states—Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia—the conservative parties have been decimated.

The sole Liberal-National Coalition win in this four-year period was last November's federal victory. Howard seized upon the arrival of the *Tampa* refugees, followed by the September 11 terrorist attacks in America, to prey upon fears and insecurities and divert attention from his own government's record. He was able to do so because the Labor leadership of Kim Beazley and Simon Crean lined up unconditionally behind him in deploying the navy against asylum seekers and dispatching troops to Afghanistan.

At the state level, however, where governments are more directly responsible for education, health and other basic services, Labor has been able to capitalise on the hostility to the previous state Liberal governments' gutting of social programs. The result is a glaring state-federal divide: a Liberal-National government in Canberra surrounded by state and territory Labor governments.

The federal-state divide underscores the degree to which Howard relies on promoting a climate of fear and anxiety over war and terrorist attacks, as well as divisive anti-refugee sentiment, to block any discussion of his government's social policies. His ability to do so is completely dependent on the lack of any opposition from Labor, either federally or at the state level.



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