

Australia: Continuing disaffection with major parties in NSW election

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) led by Premier Bob Carr was returned for its third consecutive term of office after the New South Wales (NSW) state election on March 22. Far from being an “overwhelming” and “historic” victory, as characterised by the media, Labor increased its primary vote by just 1 percent, holding on to the same 17-seat majority in the lower house that it had before the poll.

Hostility to the major parties was reflected in a substantial vote of 22.5 percent for minor parties and so-called independents. Labor lost ground to the Greens in a number of working class electorates. It only maintained its position by consolidating support in more affluent areas—traditionally the province of the conservative Liberal Party—such as Sydney’s north shore. In the relatively well off southern seats of Menai, Miranda and Kogarah, Labor gained swings of 5.4, 6.6 and 11.8 percent respectively.

The coalition—comprising the Liberal and National parties—made no gains whatsoever. Overall the Liberal vote fell by 0.1 percent to 24.7 percent, the lowest in NSW since the party was formed in 1944. The Liberals retained a total of 20 seats, while their National Party partners lost one, to hold just 12. This makes the NSW election the 14th consecutive Australian state poll that has resulted in a swing against the coalition.

The entire election campaign was overshadowed by the preparations for war against Iraq. The poll took place just two days after the US-led forces, including 2000 Australian troops, launched their invasion. As people went to cast their votes, antiwar protestors were taking to the streets, denouncing Bush, Blair and Australian Liberal Prime Minister Howard as war criminals.

The result is a blow to Howard, who personally endorsed his party’s campaign. While NSW Liberal

Party leader John Brogden sought to avoid any discussion of the war, there is no doubt that sections of the electorate used the opportunity to register their disgust with the Howard government’s commitment of troops. When Howard arrived at Brogden’s campaign launch to back the would-be premier, antiwar protesters pelted him with eggs.

The most significant gains were made by the Greens, who were able to capitalise on opposition to the war as well as on Labor’s pro-business policies. The Greens increased their statewide vote from 4.1 percent in 1999 to 8 percent. The party also trebled its parliamentary upper house vote from 2.9 percent in 1999 to 8.1 percent, increasing its seats from two to three.

In the inner Sydney seats of Port Jackson and Marrickville, which contain a mix of professionals, students and workers, the Greens challenged Labor’s traditional control. In Port Jackson, the Greens won 29 percent of the primary vote—a swing of 21 percent—and in Marrickville it recorded 27 percent against Deputy Premier Andrew Refshauge. Refshauge, a so-called “Labor left”, was so concerned about the antiwar vote that he authorised the last minute letterboxing of a statement declaring Labor’s opposition to the war.

The Greens also increased their vote in a number of working class electorates, including Bankstown and Lakemba, where sizeable Arab communities have been subjected to a barrage of racist vilification by the Carr government, and in several regional areas. In the south coast electorate of Keira, the party gained 19.4 percent.

Independent candidates continued to make inroads into the support base of the Liberal and National parties in particular. Across the state, independents increased their vote from 3 percent to 8.1 percent, winning an extra seat, which took their total to six. All sitting independents were re-elected with increased margins.

Richard Torbay won 72 percent of the primary vote in the Northern Tablelands, and Robert Oakeshott scored 70 percent in Port Macquarie. In the blue-ribbon Sydney seat of Willoughby, an independent came within an ace of defeating the Liberal candidate.

The Greens and independents increased their vote at the expense of the extreme rightwing The One Nation Party and the self-professed small “l” liberal Australian Democrats both of which virtually disappeared. Since the 1999 election both Labor and the Coalition have seized on One Nation’s policies, aggressively promoting law-and-order and racial scapegoating of Arab youth. The rightward shift by the major parties along with infighting within One Nation itself contributed to the collapse of the party’s 1999 vote of 6.3 percent to just 1.3 percent.

The Democrats had positioned themselves as the “alternative” bourgeois party in Australian politics for 25 years. They saw their vote plummet from 2.4 percent in 1999 to 0.9 percent. The party attempted to put on a “leftish” face by opposing the war and the gutting of social services by the Carr government. However, after cooperating with the Liberals to pass the GST consumption tax in federal parliament in 1998, the Democrats have been dumped by many voters in favour of the Greens.

Unlikely to gain a second candidate in the upper house, the NSW Democrats will be ineligible for public funding and face financial oblivion. The party’s national organisation, which bankrolled the campaign, could also face financial crisis.

Labor was helped back to office with the support of big business and the media. The two major daily newspapers, the Murdoch-owned tabloid *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, both endorsed a Labor victory.

Carr, with donations flowing to Labor Party coffers from the corporate sector, was able to run a \$12 million presidential-style campaign. The media played its part by carefully sidestepping Labor’s record of stripping public education, housing, and health to the bone. Potential embarrassments were largely buried—such as information linking recent tragic rail accidents with government cuts to maintenance.

With the election out of the way, big business lost no time in outlining its demands. Murdoch’s *Australian* bluntly urged Carr to bring new faces into important

portfolios and to “take economic reform seriously”. The newspaper called for the privatisation of the electricity market and told Carr to dump his pre-election commitment to reduce class sizes in public schools, advocating performance-based pay for teachers instead.

Carr responded by declaring his cabinet would be “stepping up, no relaxing”. He has flagged three new ministries, including a new utilities portfolio, and will combine the planning and transport portfolios. Carr’s focus on transport is pitched to big business, which has been calling for an overhaul of the state’s transport system.

Labor’s third term will be characterised by an ever-widening political, economic and social gulf between ordinary people and the official establishment. Inevitably, this will find expression in growing social tensions. Those who supported the Greens as an alternative to Labor, and a parliamentary vehicle for their interests and concerns, will be bitterly disappointed. Despite their current rhetoric, the Greens are wedded to the capitalist profit system, which is responsible, in the final analysis, both for the predatory war in Iraq and the protracted onslaught on living standards in NSW and elsewhere. When confronted with the so-called realities of power, they will, just like their counterparts in Germany, come down squarely on the side of the existing economic order, and in direct opposition to the needs and aspirations of ordinary people.



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