

Australian Labor returned in dreary Queensland election

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19 February 2004

In an entirely predictable result, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was reelected in the Queensland state elections on February 7 with a slightly reduced majority—winning over 60 MPs in the 89-seat parliament. Given the overwhelming majority won by the ALP in 2001 and the unanimous support right-wing Labor leader Peter Beattie has received from the corporate media over the last three years, the outcome was no surprise.

The press immediately declared the vote a “major victory”, describing Beattie as a popular figure “in touch with ordinary people” and “how they think”. These claims are absurd. The election was little more than a formality, lacking any genuine democratic content and with none of the central issues facing ordinary people addressed. Labor simply won by default. The election was regarded by broad layers of the population in the increasingly socially-polarised state with cynicism or disinterest.

Conscious of these sentiments, Labor organised the shortest possible campaign period—26 days—during the annual summer holidays and the first week of the school year. There was only one debate between Beattie and opposition leader Lawrence Springborg and it was held a day before the election. The event attracted little interest and was regarded as so inconsequential that only one media outlet—the state-funded local ABC radio—bothered to broadcast it.

Brisbane's *Courier Mail* described it as more like a “sewing circle than a political debate” which was “so lacking in vigour that one would not be surprised to discover each leader was offered a leaf of wet lettuce beforehand, but declined for fear of being seen as too rough on his opponent.” In fact, the “debate” was a microcosm of the entire election, in which there were no essential differences between the mainstream

political parties and the campaign was dominated by stage-managed media appearances and empty platitudes.

Voting in Australia is compulsory, punishable by fines, and this guarantees a high participation rate benefiting the established political parties. Nevertheless, state-polling patterns did indicate some of the mounting anger over the ongoing assault on jobs, living standards and social services.

Labor lost votes in several key areas, with the biggest swing against it in Currumbin, southeast Queensland, a mixed rural and urban area with a rapidly expanding population. Regarded as a safe Labor seat, voters angry about a range of social issues dumped Merri Rose, the former tourism minister, in a 17-percent rout.

The rural-based National party and its partners, the Liberals, continued to lose support from their traditional base—small farmers, urban middle class and small business operators. Overall the coalition, which was reduced to a 15-seat rump in the 2001 state election, only won five additional seats, making a total of 20 MPs.

Liberal Leader Bob Quinn claimed the result as a success for the party; a further demonstration that the organisation, which is the senior partner in the federal coalition government, has all but collapsed in Queensland. It now has only one MP in the greater Brisbane area, the state capital.

Some of the general disillusionment was reflected in support for the Greens, who attempted to present themselves as an alternative to the major parties. The Greens ran 72 candidates statewide and although they failed to win any seats, they secured more than 10 percent of the vote in 10 seats, including 24 percent in the inner Brisbane seat of Mount Coot-tha, and an average 6.6 percent statewide. This is more than double

their previous polling. If repeated in this year's federal election the result would ensure the Greens secured a seat in the senate.

Opposition to the established parties was also manifested in the reelection of five so-called independents and the emergence of candidates representing sugarcane farmers who have been hard-hit by deregulation, ongoing drought and lower international sugar prices.

While the "sugar" independents failed to win any seats their campaigns further eroded National's rural base. They have vowed to contest seats in federal elections later this year, which will be held against the backdrop of the escalating downturn in the local sugar industry, exacerbated by the Australia US Free Trade Agreement that blocked increased Australian sugar exports to the US.

One notable aspect of the poll was the collapse in support for the extreme-right One Nation, whose usefulness as an electoral protest mechanism has all but exhausted itself.

One Nation emerged in the late 1990s claiming to represent an "alternative" to the job destruction, privatisation and agricultural deregulation policies being implemented by Labor and Coalition regimes, state and federal. Advancing a right-wing populist program, it tapped into the generalised anger and confusion throughout Queensland and won 11 seats in the 1998 state elections.

Hit by internal fighting, defecting MPs and the adoption of its anti-refugee policies by the Howard government, it quickly lost votes and in the 2001 state election secured only three seats. This was reduced even further on February 7 with One Nation leader Bill Flynn voted out, leaving the organisation, which contested 51 seats statewide, with only one MP in the current parliament.

While One Nation has virtually disintegrated, the social problems and tensions that produced the organisation and other "alternatives" have intensified and will emerge in ever-more explosive forms.

Despite the fact that the state has experienced an average 7.9 percent annual growth, unemployment is 7.5 percent and 13.4 percent of the population lives in poverty. Poverty is most concentrated in the Cape York, Wide Bay-Burnett, and Western Queensland regions, but is widespread in working class areas

throughout the state.

According to figures released by social welfare organisations, almost 44,000 people seeking emergency welfare, disability, family and other services were turned away by Queensland community organisations last year—a 38 percent increase on previous years. In 2001-2, housing and accommodation assistance organisations had to turn away 9,000 people or 28 percent of those seeking emergency housing.

Beattie promised during the election to increase health and education. Similar promises were made during the 2001 state election, but nothing was done to arrest the decline of these vital services—there is a growing public health crisis with rising waiting lists and chronic understaffing, and education spending does not even match student enrolment growth or increased running costs.

The incoming Beattie government has no intention of seriously addressing these issues, but will continue slashing business taxes to benefit the major corporations and boost their profits.

In his first press comment after the vote, Beattie made clear that Labor's overwhelming majority would not be used to introduce any progressive reforms or increase desperately needed social spending. "Some people think we should have sex and drugs and rock n roll everyday. Well, we are not going to do that," he said. "This is going to be a stable and sensitive government delivering what I promised."

The Queensland Resources Council, a wealthy mining lobby group, welcomed the premier's remarks and immediately called for a new round of concessions, including a review of royalty payments. The state government currently receives \$780 million per year in royalties, which the mining group claims is unfair. Beattie will no doubt quickly accede to these demands.



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