Australia: Voters register opposition to major parties in local elections

Terry Cook
3 April 2004

Even within the narrow confines of local government elections, Australian voters last week took the opportunity to express hostility to the two major political parties and their pro-market domestic and foreign policies.

The March 27 elections for 142 municipal councils across the state of New South Wales saw voters in key areas reject Labor and Liberal candidates and oust longstanding mayors in favour of Independents and Greens.

In the City of Sydney, Clover Moore, an Independent state member of parliament, defeated high-profile Australian Labor Party (ALP) candidate Michael Lee for mayor. Moore won 43 percent of the vote against Lee's 23 percent. The Liberal candidate, Shayne Mallard, polled just 9.3 percent, coming in fourth behind the Greens' Chris Harris.

Lee's overwhelming defeat indicates the depth of popular contempt toward Labor at all levels—local, state and federal. Lee was Arts and Communications Minister in the Keating government before it was ousted in 1996 with the largest ever anti-Labor vote recorded in working class electorates. Keating and his predecessor Bob Hawke had presided over the wholesale destruction of jobs, working conditions and social programs.

Lee's campaign was closely backed by state Labor Premier Bob Carr. Just weeks earlier, Carr's government undemocratically abolished and merged the Sydney and South Sydney Councils. The merger brought into the City of Sydney a number of traditional Labor strongholds in what was a calculated bid to obtain a Labor-dominated city council.

Instead, Moore and her team of Independents won an outright majority on the council. The result was a resounding condemnation of the bureaucratic high-handedness for which the Carr government is renowned, as well as a rejection of its big business and cost-cutting policies, which have destroyed thousands of jobs and plunged the state's public health and transport systems into deep crisis.

Moore represents no real alternative to the pro-market agenda of the major parties. Nevertheless, she is seen by many as an outspoken critic of Carr's government and an opponent of the rapacious designs of the major property developers, which backed Labor's bid for control.

Moore is also widely regarded as an opponent of the US-led invasion of Iraq, which she denounced in state parliament in May 2003 as an "unlawful act of aggression." While condemning the invasion as "morally wrong," her concerns, like those of the Greens, were essentially tactical and nationalist. She criticised the military assault as not in "our (Australia's) national interest" and for lacking the "legitimacy of a genuine international coalition" and a "United Nations sanction."

Just across Sydney Harbour, in the municipality of Manly, Independent candidate Peter McDonald received 39 percent of first preference votes to soundly defeat incumbent Liberal mayor Jean Hay. Despite the anti-Liberal sentiment expressed in Hay's ouster, however, Labor did not gain a single council seat.

Labor managed to retain, and in some cases increase, its vote in working class western Sydney areas such as Fairfield, Parramatta and Penrith. These results are an indication of deep-seated hostility towards the Howard Liberal government, which stands to lose several seats in the region at the federal election later this year.

In Liverpool, another working class municipality, Labor cynically averted an electoral backlash over the ALP-controlled council's involvement in a major

© World Socialist Web Site

development scandal. The Carr government sacked the council, ensuring that elections were put off to a later date.

Overall, the Greens doubled their representation across the state, with Labor losing ground to Green candidates in former inner-suburban strongholds. In Marrickville, the Greens increased their representation from three to four and are in a strong position to challenge for mayor against the longtime office holder, Labor's Barry Cotter. In neighbouring Leichhardt, the Greens won five positions to Labor's four, while in nearby Ashfield they took three out of 12 positions. In another inner municipality, Randwick, Labor lost its majority on the 15-member council following the election of two Green candidates.

Greens were also elected in the rural municipalities of Orange, Wagga Wagga and the South Coast. In Byron Bay, on the state's north coast, the party won four out of seven positions and unseated the incumbent Independent mayor Ross Tucker.

While the results provide only a distorted view of the underlying trends at work on a national scale, the Greens gained mainly because many voters view them as opponents of the pro-war and free market agenda shared by Liberal and Labor. The elections were held a week after the first anniversary of the criminal US-led war on Iraq, an anniversary that was marked by demonstrations across Australia and around the world.

The results point to the ongoing anti-war and anti-establishment sentiments that led to the Greens taking their first ever seat in the federal House of Representatives at a by-election in October 2002. The Greens won at Labor's expense in the traditional ALP seat of Cunningham, based on the industrial city of Wollongong. While the Greens only criticised the impending invasion of Iraq from a tactical standpoint, they presented themselves during the Cunningham campaign as firm opponents of the war.

The strivings of ordinary people to defend social conditions and oppose US-led militarism are presently restricted to protest and the stifling framework of parliamentary elections. For those who voted for Independents or Greens it will become increasingly apparent that neither represent any genuine alternative. That requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program that challenges the very foundations of the profit system itself.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site