

Australia: Queensland by-elections reveal hostility to Labor

Mike Head
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Voters in two working class electorates in the Australian state of Queensland took the opportunity to register their disgust with the state Labor government of Premier Peter Beattie in by-elections held on August 20. Labor lost the seats of Chatsworth and Redcliffe, suffering sizeable swings against it of 14 percent and 10 percent respectively.

Anti-government votes in Australian by-elections are not unusual. In fact, they have become the norm over the past three decades as Labor and Liberal-National governments alike have imposed the free market agenda of job insecurity, destruction of working conditions, privatisation and the slashing of social services.

But the size of the backlash against Labor in the two long-held seats—Chatsworth had been in Labor's hands for 27 years—is another sign that just beneath the surface of political life, intense disaffection with both the major parties exists. Given that the Beattie government's survival was not at stake in the by-election, voters felt free to vent their contempt without any danger of returning a Coalition government.

Following a series of scandals over deteriorating health and other public services, Beattie cynically attempted to turn the by-elections into a referendum against federal Prime Minister John Howard's planned workplace relations laws and full privatisation of Telstra, the telecommunications giant. This ploy of appealing for an anti-Howard vote, succeeded at the past two state elections, in 2001 and 2004, when Beattie won landslide victories and reduced Howard's Liberal Party in Queensland to a rump of five seats in the 89-member state parliament.

But this time Beattie's efforts backfired, despite widespread public opposition to Howard's agenda. According to opinion polls, voters viewed the diversionary tactics as proof that the Labor government was not interested in fixing the crisis in the state's hospitals.

Labor's vote fell dramatically. In 2004, Beattie's deputy leader and state treasurer Terry Mackenroth obtained 56 percent of the vote in Chatsworth, which covers the Wynnum-Manly district to the east of Brisbane. This time, the Labor

candidate gained only 43 percent. In the Brisbane northern suburban electorate of Redcliffe, which former parliamentary speaker Ray Hollis held with 50 percent of the vote in 2004, Labor's share plunged to 40 percent.

If the Redcliffe result were repeated across Queensland at the next state election in 2007, Labor would lose 21 of its remaining 61 seats, enough to tip it out of office.

Despite Labor's debacle, neither the Greens nor the extreme right-wing One Nation party improved their showings. The Greens' vote fell in Chatsworth, to 7.2 percent from 8.7 percent in 2004, while they polled 6.4 percent in Redcliffe after not contesting the seat in 2004. For the by-elections, the Greens offered only vague platitudes about improving health, education and environmental protection, and made no mention of the Iraq war or the assault on democratic rights under the banner of the "war on terrorism".

One Nation polled 3.3 percent in Redcliffe and 2 percent in Chatsworth, continuing the slide in its position since the 1998 Queensland election. Then it won 11 seats by campaigning against the pro-market Labor-Liberal consensus on the basis of protectionism and anti-immigrant prejudice. Once the Howard government adopted its anti-refugee scapegoating, it began to splinter and disintegrate.

In the absence of any genuine alternative to Labor at the by-elections, the Liberals became the beneficiaries. Liberal Party state president Michael Caltabiano won Chatsworth with a "two-party preferred" (Liberal versus Labor) swing of 13.8 percent, the biggest shift against a government in a Queensland by-election. His fellow Liberal Terry Rogers picked up 8.45 percent to take Redcliffe.

Beattie had not lost an election since becoming state premier in 1998. He acquired the nickname "Mr Teflon" through his seeming ability to brush off a series of severe crises over issues such as electoral rorting, electricity blackouts and children exposed to asbestos in schools. In reality, the main factor in his survival was the support he received from the corporate media, which invariably portrayed him as a popular figure "in touch with ordinary

people”.

Until recently, Beattie was touted, along with his New South Wales (NSW) counterpart, Bob Carr, as a possible replacement for Kim Beazley as federal Labor leader. Last month, Carr quit as NSW Premier. Now “bullet-proof” Beattie has become “bullet-riddled,” as a Brisbane *Courier-Mail* editorial observed. He has become so unpopular that the Liberals featured his photograph on their posters at the by-election polling booths.

The by-elections were forced upon Beattie by the resignations of Mackenroth and Hollis, both prominent figures in his administration who appear to have read the writing on the wall. As treasurer, Mackenroth acted as Beattie’s “hard man” in enforcing budget cuts and delivering the financial requirements of business investors and real estate developers.

The hospitals crisis has been the most visible factor in Labor’s unravelling. Months of cover-up and political bullying of nurses and doctors have failed to stop the exposure of the chronic under-funding of the public health system that lies behind a trail of patient deaths that emerged at Bundaberg Base Hospital earlier this year.

According to evidence presented to an inquiry currently underway, an “unacceptable level of care” by an unregistered surgeon, Dr Jayant Patel, was responsible for adverse outcomes suffered by 48 people, including 13 who died. This only became known through the determined efforts of a Bundaberg nurse and her co-workers, who defied continual intimidation by management and the government.

When the scandal finally broke, Beattie and his ministers sought to blame Patel as an individual. It soon became clear, however, that high-ranking health officials had protected Patel because of a severe statewide shortage of doctors and because Patel’s surgery provided the cash-strapped hospital with lucrative fee revenue.

Beattie’s health minister, Gordon Nuttall, initially denied any knowledge of the bureaucratic suppression of the nurse’s complaints, and of concerns about other foreign-trained doctors. When Nuttall’s claims collapsed, Beattie was compelled to remove him from the health ministry. Last week, Nuttall stood aside from his new post as primary industries minister following the instigation of a Crime and Misconduct Commission investigation into allegedly misleading answers he gave to a parliamentary committee.

Several months ago, Beattie attempted damage control by apologising to the public and setting up an inquiry into the scandal, headed by Tony Morris QC. Beattie’s insistence that he had “done the right thing” by holding an inquiry has also backfired, with doctors, nurses and health officials testifying daily about the government’s financial starving of public health.

Last week, for example, Dr Keith McNeil, an eminent organ transplant surgeon at Brisbane’s Prince Charles Hospital, commented in a written statement to the inquiry: “Queensland Health is facing a crisis which at the end of the day stems predominantly from a situation of chronic under-funding. This has led to a steady drain of highly-trained medical and other health professional staff from the public system, placing steadily increasing pressure on those that remain to meet the ever-increasing demand.”

Just before the by-elections came revelations that the government has covered up the existence of “secret” waiting lists at Queensland hospitals. More than 100,000 outpatients have been kept in unofficial appointment queues to see specialists before they can even get on a formal hospital waiting list.

Historically, public health has been such a major issue for working people in Queensland that even former right-wing National Party premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, whose government ruled from 1968 to 1987, dared not dismantle the state’s long-established system of free hospitals.

The decay of the health system in Labor’s hands reflects wider processes. For all Beattie’s attempts to posture as an opponent of the Howard government, he and his fellow state Labor premiers across the country have willingly cooperated with the Coalition in implementing pro-market policies. The states have been engaged in a never-ending competition to gut welfare, health, education, housing and other social programs so as to fund financial incentives for foreign investors.

With the collapse of the real estate boom that boosted state government coffers over the past decade, the Labor governments now confront demands by business for even deeper cuts to social spending and public sector jobs that will inevitably fuel broader popular opposition.



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