

Australia: state opposition leader resigns amid media furore

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The sudden resignation last week of John Brogden, the leader of Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal Party in the state of New South Wales, and his attempted suicide two days later has provided a revealing glimpse into the decayed state of official politics in Australia.

Brogden was removed as a result of a smear campaign orchestrated by the Murdoch media and an extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalist faction in the Liberal Party. The underhanded methods used to oust Brogden, himself an insubstantial figure who had previously been cultivated by the same media, are indicative of a political elite that has no substantial base of popular support.

Brogden announced his snap resignation at a press conference on August 29, just one day after one of Murdoch's Sydney tabloids, the *Sunday Telegraph*, accused the state opposition leader of pinching the bottom of one female journalist, propositioning another, and making a slur against the former Labor Premier Bob Carr's wife, a Malaysian-born businesswoman, whom Brogden referred to as a "mail-order-bride".

The media campaign had nothing to do with sexual indiscretions or racist remarks. Brogden's behaviour had taken place a month earlier, during a drinking session with journalists after an Australian Hotels Association event at the Sydney Hilton. Reporters who witnessed the incidents evidently did not regard the events as newsworthy. After all, such backwardness is hardly anything more than standard practice in political and media circles.

The affair only became "news" four weeks later after Glenn Milne, one of Murdoch's most senior political journalists, broke the story in the *Sunday Telegraph*. The next day, August 29, the episode dominated the headlines. "Brogden: My Racist Disgrace" was the *Daily Telegraph*'s front-page banner. "My foolish, boozy night" ran across the front of Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Prime Minister Howard immediately signalled his support for Brogden's resignation, telling Macquarie Radio Network news that Brogden's fate was in his own hands and that of his parliamentary colleagues.

The campaign did not end when Brogden quit just hours later. He initially said he would stay on as an MP "to spare the public another by-election" and indicated his ongoing leadership aspirations by describing his future as a "middle bencher". He was then confronted by questions from the *Daily Telegraph* over a "shame file" it was planning to publish, alleging sexual indiscretions more than three years ago. The newspaper's early

Wednesday edition led with "Brogden's sordid past" before the story was pulled after Brogden attempted suicide.

The media hypocrisy about "racism" and "moral standards" was breathtaking. While Brogden's activities were splashed across the front pages as a capital offence, real crimes are passed over in silence. The same outlets showed no similar moral qualms when they embraced Howard's lies about Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers throwing children overboard or his government's "weapons of mass destruction" fraud, which was used to launch the illegal invasion of Iraq.

In reality, the media mobilisation against Brogden and the accompanying backroom Liberal Party machinations were the latest in a long line of efforts to overcome deep political problems that beset not only Howard's Liberal Party but the political establishment as a whole.

At the heart of these problems is the mounting difficulty in imposing the corporate free market agenda on an increasingly hostile population, and the resulting collapse in membership and support for both the traditional ruling parties, Liberal and Labor.

At the federal level, the Howard government took office in 1996, by exploiting the anger and alienation generated by 13 years of pro-market economic restructuring carried out by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Howard has survived through the lack of any opposition from Labor and the shameless use of fear campaigns over refugees, terrorism and, at the last elections, the prospect of rising interest rates.

But the growing hostility toward Howard's government has been partly expressed in repeated, often landslide, election defeats of the Coalition parties in each of Australia's eight states and territories. Nowhere is this phenomenon more acutely demonstrated than in New South Wales, the most populous state and Howard's home base, where Labor has been in office since 1995.

Brogden himself was installed as state Liberal leader by an internal "coup" in 2002 in an attempt to bolster the party's disastrous electoral stocks. He only narrowly defeated his predecessor Kerry Chikarovski, a close Howard supporter, who became widely regarded as unelectable. At the 1999 state election, she had performed disastrously, with the Liberals suffering heavy losses.

Only in his early 30s, Brogden was touted as a fresh new face. Yet, his installation resolved nothing. At the 2003 state election the overall Liberal vote fell by 0.1 percent to 24.7 percent, the lowest state result since the party was formed in 1944. Apart from

being unable to overcome the ongoing anti-Howard sentiment, Brogden had no real policy differences with Premier Carr's right-wing Labor government, which has been fully complicit in Howard's pro-market policies.

Brogden attempted to outdo Carr on "law and order" by calling for even more repressive police measures to deal with riots that erupted among Aboriginal and working class youth in Redfern and Macquarie Fields, but he made little headway.

His failure was all the most apparent amid signs of mounting public anger over Labor's gutting of train services, public health, education and other essential social services. Economic growth in NSW has also been slipping, with growing nervousness over the collapse of a decade-long real estate boom, which had kept the state government's finances afloat.

Ironically, the immediate trigger for the moves against Brogden was Carr's resignation on July 27. Amid widespread public hostility to his government's policies, Carr left with an eye to a career in the federal parliament where Labor confronts a continuing leadership crisis. He was followed by his deputy Andrew Refshauge and protégé Craig Knowles. A virtually unknown junior minister, Morris Iemma, replaced Carr.

Brogden attempted to go on the offensive, lambasting Iemma's low public profile and announcing a campaign to "Make NSW Number One Again." Appealing for the backing of big business, which had substantially supported Carr, he declared that Iemma was "not prepared to make the tough decisions". He unveiled plans to slash 29,000 jobs from the public sector, cut employer's Workcover insurance premiums for injured workers by 10 percent, eliminate the "No Forced Redundancy" policy for public sector workers and establish a two-year hiring freeze to save \$1 billion and protect the state's AAA credit rating.

Nevertheless, despite Carr's departure, Brogden failed to make any impression. A Murdoch media-run Newspoll released August 22 showed that Brogden's rating as preferred Premier had slumped to 27 percent. His factional opponents in the Liberal Party seized on this to campaign for his removal, with Brogden coming under attack over a range of issues, including his refusal to field candidates in two of the three state by-elections being held on September 17, triggered by the resignations of Carr, Refshauge and Knowles.

By late August, it seems that a decision was made inside the Murdoch organisation that Brogden would have to go. If the Liberals were to present any credible alternative to Labor at the state level, a new leader had to be installed.

Brogden has been replaced by Peter Debnam, also virtually unknown, and the fifth Liberal leader in a decade. The former shadow police minister was a naval officer and business consultant before entering parliament in 1994 as MP for the exclusive Sydney suburb of Vaucluse. His reputation as a silver tail has earned him the media moniker "Prince Charles".

His only claim to the leadership appears to rest on the backing he has received from an extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalist faction in the Liberal Party. Brogden's deputy, Barry O'Farrell, who had been tipped to take the top post, withdrew from the contest after reports that the Christian faction threatened his supporters with the removal of their party endorsement for the next

state election in 2007.

Members of the Christian grouping, led by Upper House MP David Clarke, have opposed Brogden's "socially liberal" policies, including support for gay marriage, drug injecting rooms, multiculturalism and an Australian republic, which were part of Brogden's pitch to represent "Global Sydney". In line with many in the Howard government, the Clark faction advocates a range of Christian "family values" issues, such as restrictions on abortion, in an attempt to fashion a social base for the carrying through of pro-market policies.

The NSW Liberal Party has been in a state of siege for months, with branch stacking by the right faction, which includes university students recruited via the Catholic Church's arch-conservative Opus Dei organisation. In May, the faction took control of the party's state executive, which decides on parliamentary candidate pre-selections.

Such is the level of tension within the party that one state Liberal MP, Patricia Forsythe, lashed out publicly at the Clarke faction after Brogden's ouster, labelling them "zealots and extremists". But the takeover tactics by the extreme right are not the cause of Brogden's resignation. Rather, it is reflective of a deeper crisis: the lack of any substantial social base. The rightward shift of capitalist politics over the past two decades has seen both parties alienate the broad masses of ordinary people.

Liberal Party membership has fallen to such lows that Clarke's followers have had little difficulty in assuming a prominent role. In 2002, the Liberals' NSW branch, their largest, had only 6,000 members, and two-thirds of them were aged 65 or older. The situation is similar across the country. And according to West Australian Liberal MP Don Randall, 90 percent of Liberal dues-paying members are "phantom members", playing no active role.

The party has been reduced to feuding cliques, which have no fundamental differences over the basic program required by global capital—privatisation, "user pays", slashing social spending, and the boosting of police powers to deal with social unrest. But under conditions of ever-widening social inequality, the warring camps are trying to fashion political means of imposing unpalatable measures.

At the federal level, similar tensions are simmering beneath the surface of a looming leadership showdown between Howard and his Liberal Party deputy, Treasurer Peter Costello. Both have been assiduously courting the Christian fundamentalist constituency, as well as the corporate elite. Brogden's removal and Debnam's installation in NSW are no doubt connected to factional manoeuvring in the Liberal Party in Canberra, which has the potential to erupt at some point in spectacular fashion.



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