

Australia: NSW by-elections another sign of political volatility

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In by-elections held last weekend in Sydney, the Labor government in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) retained control of all three seats—Maroubra, Marrickville and Macquarie Fields.

Yet, the results are hardly a victory for the government, or the opposition Liberal Party. What WSWs teams found on the day was a profound disconnect between the official campaigns and the attitudes of voters who viewed all the main parties with a mixture of distrust, contempt and outright hostility. (See “Australian voters speak of concerns and discontent”).

The outcomes were only a distorted reflection of these sentiments. In Macquarie Fields, the swing against Labor was 12.4 percent, with the highest-ever vote recorded in that seat for a Liberal candidate. In Marrickville there was a 7.5 percent drop in support for Labor and a record 41 percent vote for the Greens, which came close to the winning the seat.

Although the swing against Labor in Maroubra was only 3.4 percent, the Greens won significant support in the southeastern suburbs seat, doubling its previous vote, and there was also an 11 percent vote for a local “independent” candidate.

Labor Premier Morris Iemma attempted to downplay the loss of votes as typical of by-elections, but, if the Macquarie Fields swing against Labor were replicated in a full state election, the party would lose office.

All three electorates have previously been regarded as “safe” Labor seats. Last Saturday’s ballots were called after the sudden resignation of Iemma’s predecessor, Bob Carr, on July 27 and in the shadow of internal crises in both the Labor and Liberal parties.

Carr quit without any advance warning to Labor Party officials, claiming that he was retiring from politics. He was followed several days later by deputy premier

Andrew Refshauge and planning minister Craig Knowles (see “Australia: state Labor leader positions himself for a federal political career”).

The resignations set off a nervous scramble by the state Labor bureaucracy to appoint a new premier, reshuffle the cabinet and select new local candidates. Former health minister Iemma, a rather colourless unknown, was eventually installed as state premier. He pledged to maintain Carr’s policies and, confronting budget difficulties, announced plans to axe 4,000 public sector jobs.

For many voters, the sudden departure of Carr and two senior ministers conjured up the image of rats deserting a sinking ship. With Sydney’s long-running property boom collapsing and an ongoing crisis in public transport, health and education, Carr and his senior ministers decided that, rather than face possible defeat at the next state election, it was time to get out and perhaps look for greener pastures.

First elected in 1995, Labor has systematically run down basic public services and jobs—in education, health and transport—while delivering windfall tax concessions for major corporations and investors. Public transport is in serious difficulties, with the metropolitan rail system in chaos due to job cuts, outsourcing and inadequate maintenance. There have been three major rail accidents since the late 1990s, and late running trains and service cancellations have become routine.

At the same time, Labor has boosted police numbers, doubled the number of prisoners and, in the name of fighting terrorism, introduced some of the most repressive laws in Australia. To bolster its “law-and-order” image, Carr ruthlessly mobilised riot police against unemployed youth in Macquarie Fields and Redfern.

However, the mounting disaffection with Labor has not boosted the Liberal Party. Its leader John Brogden saw Carr's resignation as the best opportunity in years to win office and went on the offensive. In a pitch to big business, Brogden declared that he would eliminate 29,000 public sector jobs.

Opinion polling, however, showed no real gains for the Liberals, unleashing bitter recriminations within the party. Within two weeks, Brogden was ousted as state leader after a scandal manufactured by the media and his Liberal Party rivals. He was replaced by Peter Debnam with the backing of right-wing Christian elements within the party (see "Australia: state opposition leader resigns amid media furore").

The by-elections were regarded as tests for the newly-appointed Labor and Liberal leaders. Neither party, however, attempted to make any broad appeal. The candidates focused almost entirely on narrow, parochial issues. The media played its part by paying scant attention to the campaign both before polling day and after, thus ensuring that any political discussion remained limited.

By contrast, many voters used the election as an opportunity to lodge a protest against Labor on a range of issues, demonstrating once again that there is no longer such a thing as a "safe seat" for either party. Two decades of market "reforms" by both Labor and Liberal at the state and federal levels have had a devastating impact, particularly in working class areas. Old political loyalties have broken up, creating highly volatile voting patterns.

Labor has held the seat of Macquarie Fields since it was created. It is one of the poorest electorates in Australia and the scene in March this year of violent clashes between scores of unemployed youth and heavily armed riot police. The rundown of essential services, particularly health care, have been a source of ongoing resentment and anger throughout the area.

The Liberal Party capitalised on these sentiments by standing a local nurse, Nola Fraser, who is well-known for having exposed the deteriorating state of local public hospitals. She obtained the highest vote ever for a Liberal candidate in the electorate. Fraser, however, was simply a convenient focus for popular resentment—a means of registering disgust with Labor. Her vote had little to do with any increased backing for the Liberals.

Labor only suffered a 3.4 percent swing in Maroubra and easily held the seat, but the Greens significantly boosted their vote. Its candidate Anne Gardiner polled 19.5 percent, more than double their previous vote. Gardiner, a mother of five children, is known for a campaign she waged against her employer's attempt to relocate her to a rural area.

Like other Greens candidates, Gardiner focused exclusively on local issues. Her campaign centred on opposing new charges for street lighting and Labor's road transport planning. Voters' concerns on a wide range of issues, including jobs and working conditions, the war in Iraq, the repressive anti-terror laws and the treatment of refugees, were largely ignored.

In the seat of Marrickville, Greens candidate Sam Byrne, a local deputy mayor, adopted a similar strategy and gained the highest-ever primary vote for the party in any Australian election. Byrne restricted himself to empty platitudes about improving public services and the slogan "send a message" to Labor. The Greens, which previously cashed in on their limited opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq, were completely silent on the issue.

Labor had to work furiously to ensure its candidate, Carmel Tebutt, was elected. Tebutt, the education minister, had resigned her seat in the state upper house to contest the seat. Unable to call on any significant active party membership, Labor flooded the electorate with party and union bureaucrats, their family members and high-profile figures, including federal leader Kim Beazley and Peter Garrett, a former rock star and now MP. The party spent an estimated \$150,000 in leafletting and other campaign expenses to prevent a potentially embarrassing defeat.

At a superficial level, the outcome of the polls produced no surprises and no change in the parliamentary line-up. But the by-elections again confirm that not far below the surface there is a political ferment taking place that none of the major parties can even address.



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