

# Sordid deals as Australian parliamentary parties pick their candidates

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With elections due early next year in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, currently governed by the Labor Party, the past weeks have seen a series of sleazy "preselection" deals as Liberal and Labor pick their local candidates. While political arm-twisting and anti-democratic manoeuvring are no surprise to those familiar with the so-called preselection process, this month's events have plumbed new lows.

The Liberal and Labor parties could once claim tens of thousands of active members. Today they are empty shells, kept afloat by corporate media support and millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded electoral financing. Where local branches exist they are either stacked with cronies of the party leadership or rival bureaucratic aspirants. Any semblance of local membership selection of parliamentary candidates is only tolerated if it coincides with the immediate political needs of the state and federal branch apparatchiks.

This month, for example, NSW Labor premier Morris Iemma and the state leadership imposed candidates on six local branches, as well as intervening to prevent rank-and-file members from disendorsing two officially favoured sitting MPs. Those protected were unpopular state parliamentarians Angela D'Amore and Planning Minister Frank Sartor, who would have been dumped if local ALPers had been allowed to participate in a preselection vote.

New candidates selected without branch votes were Nathan Reece, an unknown bureaucrat who works in Iemma's office, and Parramatta Lord Mayor David Borger, who was appointed to replace retiring MP Kim Yeadon for the seat of Granville. Borger has previously protested undemocratic preselection deals but on this occasion cynically declared that he was not interested

in discussing them. He only wanted to "talk about the future".

The most blatantly anti-democratic Labor appointments, however, occurred in Newcastle and Shellharbour, key industrial electorates in NSW.

Long-standing Newcastle MP Bryce Gaudry was replaced by Jodi McKay, a former television newsreader and now business consultant. Gaudry was dumped because he had publicly opposed the state government's cuts to the local rail service and fought to maintain rank-and-file voting in all NSW preselection ballots.

In Shellharbour, which is part of Wollongong and home to Australia's biggest steel works, Lylea McMahon replaced retiring MP Marianne Saliba as the local candidate.

Decades ago most Labor MPs were selected on the basis of their record in the labour movement. McKay and McMahon were tapped on the shoulder by the ALP state leadership because of their intimate relations with local business, big and small.

McKay, for example, told the Newcastle media that she had been seriously considering joining the Liberal Party but decided to sign up to Labor on August 31, after a discussion with Iemma. The next day Iemma announced that she would be the local candidate.

As for Shellharbour candidate, Lylea McMahon, she has impeccable business connections and is a senior "human resources" executive for BlueScope Steel, the company spun off from BHP-Billiton—one of Australia's largest and most ruthless employers.

The two appointments were made without any consultation or voting by Labor members in Newcastle or Wollongong, despite the fact that at the last ALP state conference, a resolution was put forward demanding that the state leadership stop interfering in

preselections. While narrowly defeated, it was just one of a dozen similar resolutions.

Determined to crush any challenge, Iemma and his cronies took the unprecedented step of having their favoured candidates rubber-stamped by the party's federal executive. This, according to Iemma, was required to ensure the party had "new blood". Local ALP members in Newcastle and Shellharbour are currently discussing whether to boycott the forthcoming state election or run independent candidates.

Commenting on Labor's preselections, Liberal state leader Peter Debnam claimed that the appointment of candidates by his organisation was completely different. "We don't just plonk our mates in seats like the ALP," he declared, "We have a democratic process."

Debnam's assertions are laughable. Political bullying inside the Liberal Party is a commonplace and demonstrated by the frantic manoeuvres carried out over the past weeks to ensure Pru Goward, a close friend and political ally of Prime Minister Howard, was given a safe Liberal seat in the NSW parliament.

Finding a place for Goward was an important test for Debnam, who only became head of the NSW organisation earlier this year following a scandal orchestrated by Christian fundamentalist and other extreme-right wing elements to force out former leader John Brogden. Debnam had to ensure that the party's extreme right was satisfied while at the same time arranging a seat for Goward and thus boost his standing with Howard.

Goward, an executive director of the Office of the Status of Women in the prime minister's department from 1997 to 2001 and currently Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, had decided to contest the north Sydney electorate of Epping.

Her main rival was Greg Smith, a deputy director of public prosecutions in NSW and former president of the anti-abortion Right to Life Association. Smith had the overwhelming support of the Christian right, which not only has the largest voting bloc in the area, it now, as a result of blatant branch-stacking and other sordid methods, has immense influence throughout the NSW party.

Goward was easily defeated at the local preselection vote on September 16. But even as Smith was being

declared the Liberal candidate for Epping, Debnam announced that Goward would be given a position in the rural seat of Goulburn.

There was to be no consultation or voting for Goulburn's Liberals. Instead, local Liberal MP Peta Seaton, the current shadow treasurer and energy minister, suddenly announced she was quitting her position to make way for Goward. When local lawyer Martin Laverty declared his long-held intention to run for the seat, he was summonsed to a high-level meeting with Debnam at state parliament two days later, and "persuaded" not to nominate.

Various back-door deals ensured that a slate of Debnam's favoured candidates was pre-selected. These included, rugby league football executive Graham Annersley, banker Michael Baird, the son of federal Liberal MP Bruce Baird, and former police inspector Trish Hitchens.

Last weekend Sharryn Hilton, a real estate agent, was anointed the Liberal candidate for Picton. The outer southwestern Sydney electorate had been promised to another Liberal, Jai Rowell, but Debnam wanted Hilton and so the nomination process was duly "reopened". Predictably, Rowell was persuaded by Debnam to withdraw, and Hilton was elected unopposed.

Notwithstanding various tactical disagreements and verbal jousting over which party is toughest on terror, crime and "law and order", there are no significant differences between them. The ALP currently holds power in Australia's six states and two territories, while Howard's Liberal Party—in coalition with the rural-based National Party—rules federally. The various Labor and Liberal leaderships work seamlessly together, in a bipartisan offensive not just against the democratic rights and basic concerns of their own party memberships, but against the fundamental interests of the vast majority of the population.



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