

Australia: Queensland election reveals deep disaffection

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition suffered its 20th consecutive state and territory election loss last Saturday when the Queensland Labor government was returned to office. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie won by default, with hostility to the Howard government unable to find any progressive outlet.

The result was hardly surprising, given that the stage-managed, four-week campaign was dominated by overwhelming media and business backing for Beattie. Corporate donors pumped so much into Labor's coffers that it outspent the Coalition on advertising by an estimated six to one. Rupert Murdoch's newspapers editorialised for a Labor victory and media polls constantly predicted a landslide win.

Beattie also profited from bitter factional infighting within the Coalition. Just four weeks before election day, the state Liberal leader Bob Quinn was deposed in an internal coup by an inexperienced newcomer to parliament, Bruce Flegg. Apparently, Liberal powerbrokers hoped that Flegg, a former medical doctor, could capture votes from Labor because of the crisis within the public hospital network. But Flegg proved to be an inept campaigner, and the media, intent on propping up Beattie, immediately labelled him "bumbling".

Labor secured a record fourth successive term of government and is expected to maintain its 60 seats in the 89-seat state parliament. The party polled just over 47 percent of the primary vote—a slight swing toward it of 0.4 percentage points—but will again enjoy a massive parliamentary majority because of the preferential voting system.

Since the last election in 2004, Beattie's government has staggered from crisis to crisis, facing popular disgust over the state of the public health system and the breakdown of electricity, water and other basic services. Yet, for the third election in a row, the coalition parties were left with a tiny parliamentary rump. Once vote-counting is complete, they are likely to have only 24 seats—a gain of one—after obtaining just 37.6 percent of the primary vote, up 2 percentage points.

Beattie sought to exploit widespread opposition to the Howard government's new "WorkChoices" industrial laws, which have already seen an onslaught on jobs and working conditions. As a result, Labor's vote increased marginally in some working class electorates. In the industrial city of

Gladstone, which Labor had previously lost to an Independent, the IR laws are credited with producing a 10 percent swing back to Labor, almost enough to regain the seat.

In the course of the campaign, Labor branded itself "Team Beattie", in order to distance itself from the deeply unpopular federal Labor party, and the equally unpopular Labor leader Kim Beazley—who was kept out of the state. The party's advertising portrayed Beattie as the only figure capable of standing up to Howard's IR laws, the privatisation of Telstra, and rising interest rates and petrol prices. "We've got to have a state Labor government that will stand up to Canberra and fight for Queensland," he declared two days before the vote.

The reality is that the Queensland Labor government has collaborated closely with Howard since Beattie first took office in 1998, implementing the same vicious free market and "user pays" agenda. At the same time, it has vied with every other state Labor regime around the country to attract investment by cutting business taxes and driving down labour costs.

A poll published on election eve by Murdoch's Brisbane *Courier-Mail* provided a glimpse of the extent of disaffection towards the government. It reported that 57 percent of voters felt Beattie did not merit another term, although 81 percent expected him to win. A total of 68 percent said the Coalition did not deserve to govern. Even among those who counted themselves Labor supporters, one in three did not believe that Labor deserved to be in office, while 40 percent of Coalition supporters felt the same way about the Liberals and Nationals. In other words, close to two thirds of the electorate thought that neither party should form a government.

Labor's campaign featured pledges to boost business even more by offering subsidies and pushing ahead with "public-private partnerships" to build new infrastructure, including toll roads, schools and hospitals. Its main attack on the Coalition was from the right, claiming the Coalition would "blow the budget" with a "\$2.3 billion spending spree" on basic services.

Once again, the core of Labor's electoral support came from so-called "Beattie Liberals"—upper middle class and professional people in Brisbane's more prosperous suburbs. Over the past decade, they have abandoned the Liberals to such an extent that the conservative party holds only two Brisbane metropolitan seats.

Beyond these suburbs, the prevailing sentiment was one of cynicism and a lack of confidence in any parliamentary party. Some of the alienation saw four of the five Independents who were elected in 2004 retain their seats, taking a total of 4.7 percent of the vote, down 1.2 points.

The extreme right-wing One Nation party returned just one MP, with its vote collapsing to 0.6 percent. During the late 1990s, it won almost a quarter of the vote in Queensland, claiming to oppose the job destruction, privatisation and agricultural deregulation being imposed by Labor and Coalition governments. By 2001, however, it had virtually disintegrated amid infighting and the adoption of many of its policies by both Howard and Beattie.

Family First, a right-wing Christian party, stood in Queensland for the first time, but largely failed in its efforts to capture the One Nation constituency. Its candidates picked up 1.9 percent of the vote.

The Greens, now widely promoted by the media as the “third” party, stood 75 candidates, their highest ever number, and picked up 7.9 percent of the statewide vote, up 1.2 points. Because of the single electorate voting system, they failed to obtain a single seat.

Their call to voters to “send a message” to the major parties appealed primarily to inner-city, middle class electorates. The Greens won over 20 percent of the vote in South Brisbane and Mount Coot-tha, and polled more than 15 percent in five other seats—Yeerongpilly, Ashgrove, Indooroopilly, Moggill and Brisbane Central.

The Greens’ campaign was utterly silent on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Australian military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, and the Beattie government’s enthusiastic partnership with the Howard government in the assault on basic legal and civil rights in the name of the “war on terrorism”. Instead, the Greens opportunistically sought votes from both Labor and Liberal supporters, urging them to cast a primary vote for the Greens and then a second preference for “your preferred major party” in order to get the main parties to “pull their socks up”.

The mainstream media absurdly attributed Beattie’s victory to the power of “incumbency” in a period of “economic prosperity” against a “backdrop of terrorism”. *Australian Financial Review* political correspondent Mark Davis declared that Beattie’s win confirmed that “volatility and the unpredictable in Australian politics have given way to stability and risk aversion”.

Even the way Beattie called the election highlighted the lack of popular support for any of the established parties. Just over a year ago, in August 2005, voters in two working class electorates dealt his government a sharp electoral blow. Anger over electricity blackouts, deaths in public hospitals, secret medical waiting lists and water shortages, saw Labor lose the two seats with anti-government swings of 14 percent and 10 percent—enough to tip Labor out of office if repeated at a

general election.

Last month, Beattie called a snap early election in order to capitalise on the eruption of damaging conflicts in the Coalition. In early June, Howard and his deputy prime minister, National Party leader Mark Vaile, had intervened to scuttle an already announced merger between their two parties in Queensland. The proposal threatened the continued existence of the Nationals federally, ending the arrangements by which the Nationals, by maintaining a separate identity, have delivered rural votes to conservative parties since the 1920s.

The Coalition’s disastrous election performance has further destabilised both the Nationals and the Liberals, in Queensland and nationally. Murdoch’s *Australian* has urged the Liberals—who hold just 8 seats in the Queensland parliament, while the rural-based Nationals occupy 16 (thanks to provincial gerrymandering)—to fight to replace the Nationals as the main opposition party in the state. To add fuel to the fire, one of Howard’s junior ministers, Gary Hardgrave, has demanded that the Nationals “get the hell out of south-east Queensland [and] give the Liberal Party a chance to win some seats”.

The Nationals have lost half their federal vote since Howard won office in 1996, and such calls could accelerate their demise. Conscious of the alienation among small farmers and the rural poor, a former federal National MP, Bob Katter, who broke from the party in 2001, has called for the formation of a new rural political “beast” to fill the “vacuum” left by the Nationals and One Nation. “We most certainly will be riding that same horse of discontent,” Katter said.

The *Courier-Mail* editorial on Monday expressed alarm at its above-mentioned poll results showing that nearly one in six Queensland voters thought neither party deserved to be in office. It called on Beattie to “serve his fellow Queenslanders’ best interests by turning his parliamentarians’ minds to the need to rebuild faith in government and the political process”.

How Beattie could do so while continuing to carry out an agenda that is totally inimical to the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people, the editorial did not explain.



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