Australia: Bracks government—a “common agenda” with Howard

Will Marshall, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Broadmeadows
14 November 2006

In its bid to hang onto office in the Australian state of Victoria, the Labor Party is again running a scare campaign for the November 25 election. Premier Steve Bracks harps on the dark days of the conservative Liberal government of the 1990s, which closed hundreds of schools, destroyed 70,000 public sector jobs and accelerated privatisations. But as the record of the past seven years demonstrates, Labor has not only matched, but outdone, the Liberals under former premier Jeff Kennett.

There are no real differences between Labor and Liberal on the central issues in this election: war, democratic rights and social inequality. Far from reversing the thrust of Kennett’s measures, Bracks has used them to deepen the pro-market agenda required by the business establishment. Not only that, he has led the other Labor premiers in every Australian state and territory in forging a virtual coalition with the federal Howard government.

In fact, big business is blatantly backing Bracks’s re-election because, in the words of the *Australian Financial Review*, he has “taken the lead in establishing a common agenda with John Howard”. Last month, the newspaper’s magazine named Bracks as the fifth most powerful person in Australia (just behind Rupert Murdoch) because he was “heading the push for a national reform agenda” and his third election victory “is seen as inevitable”.

Prime Minister John Howard spoke at the formal launch of the Liberal Party’s election campaign last weekend, making some token criticisms of Bracks. But his real message to the Liberal party faithful and state leader Ted Baillieu at the launch was spelt out in the words, “It’s a tough fight but it can be done.” As the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented, this was polite code for, “fat chance, guys”.

Bracks has been part of the political division of labour that has emerged nationally. The Labor premiers have embraced Howard’s “war on terror” and tacitly backed Australian participation in the criminal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, in return for a similar bipartisan front on the accompanying corporate agenda domestically.

Bracks has said virtually nothing on the Iraq war. Instead, he has left the running to federal Labor leader Kim Beazley, who fully supports the US occupation of Iraq, but for purely tactical reasons now wants Australian troops re-deployed to Afghanistan and the Pacific region. Labor’s central preoccupation is with using the military to better pursue the strategic and commercial interests of corporate Australia, from East Timor and Papua New Guinea to Solomon Islands and Fiji.

Bracks has backed successive federal Labor leaders—Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham, and Beazley again—as they have attempted to outbid Howard on militarism, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim “homeland security” and meeting the demands of big business for ever-lower labour costs and higher profit rates.

Bracks has been intimately involved in all the attacks on fundamental civil liberties in the name of combating terrorism. The barrage of federal “anti-terrorism” laws since 2002 has been constantly matched by state legislation—allowing for interrogation and detention without trial, “terrorist” convictions without evidence of any terrorist act and semi-secret trials where the accused cannot see key evidence. In the name of fighting terrorism, Victorian police have been handed unprecedented powers, including the ability to secretly enter, search and bug homes.

Last year, Bracks strongly backed Howard in using a November “terror scare” to push through draconian federal and state laws establishing new forms of “preventative detention”—such as the “control order” imposed on Melbourne man Jack Thomas despite his acquittal on terrorism charges. The legislation agreed by the Council of Australian Governments also included revamped sedition powers that can be used to jail opponents of Australia’s neo-colonial military interventions.

To justify Howard’s “terror scare”, 13 young Islamic men from Melbourne’s working class suburbs, including Broadmeadows, have been incarcerated in isolation cells in Victorian prisons for the past year, and are likely to wait another year before being placed on trial—without any evidence of specific terrorist planning. Bracks and Howard also exploited this year’s Commonwealth Games in Melbourne to deploy several thousand troops, mostly on standby, after further bolstering the powers to call-out the military against civilian unrest.

None of these measures is about protecting ordinary people from terrorism. Well before 2001, every conceivable terrorist act was already a crime, and the state and federal security agencies had a vast array of powers to combat crimes of violence, including phone tapping, bugging and home searches. If the threat of domestic terrorism has worsened, it is primarily due to the bipartisan support for the US-led turn to militarism. At home, the “war on terror” has become a pretext for introducing police-state measures that will be increasingly directed against political and social unrest. Under Bracks, while the cuts to education, health and social services have continued, public sector jobs have been fully restored in only one field—police numbers have risen to 11,000, which is actually 1,400 above Kennett’s level.

Even before his government was elected in 1999, Bracks pledged to continue Kennett’s pro-business agenda. Bracks was the architect of Labor’s *New Solutions* platform that claimed to present a “new kind of politics”. His claims mimicked British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s “Third Way”, which was nothing more than a camouflage for continuing the savage attack on the working class begun by Thatcher. At the following state election, in 2002, the business and media establishment openly threw its weight behind Bracks’s re-election, helping to deliver Labor a clear parliamentary majority and control of the upper house for the first time.

Since 1999, Labor has reopened none of the closed schools. Teacher-student ratios and class sizes have remained at Kennett-levels. Overall, Labor has run down public education and prepared new closures, driving up private school enrolments to record levels. According to an Australian Education Union audit, almost 90 percent of government schools have inadequate classrooms, 75 percent require urgent maintenance and 77 percent are understaffed. Nearly 20 percent of teachers are still on short-

© World Socialist Web Site

term contracts and “performance pay” has been imposed to increase the intimidatory pressure on teachers.

In the public health system, more than 20,000 people are waiting to be added to lists for elective surgery, where there are officially 40,000 in the queues. It is estimated the public hospitals need 900 more doctors, predicted to grow to about 1,500 in the next five years. Broadmeadows, a major working class area, still has no hospital. Public housing has been slashed, even though 35,000 people are on waiting lists, 20,000 are homeless across the state and welfare agencies can house only a third of those who seek help. In the private housing market, the artificial real estate bubble of the early 2000s has predictably collapsed. Over the past year, house repossessions have risen by 52 percent amid unprecedented mortgage and credit card debt.

While company profits and executive salaries have soared thanks to Labor’s policies, the destruction of permanent jobs and hard-won working conditions has intensified poverty and social inequality. No one in the Bracks government—least of all Treasurer John Brumby, the local MP for Broadmeadows—has opposed Ford Australia’s latest corporate crime: the elimination of 640 jobs in Broadmeadows and Geelong. Over the past six years, the number of manufacturing workers in Victoria, Australia’s biggest industrial base, has shrunk by 40,000 to just over 300,000. Time and again, Labor and the trade unions have urged workers to accept the job losses without a fight, in order to help business boost productivity and “global competitiveness”.

Likewise, jobs have continued to be axed, outsourced or casualised in former state-owned enterprises. Bracks has pursued Kennett’s privatisations via so-called Public Private Partnerships. Basic facilities—such as freeways, hospitals, railway stations—have been handed over to merchant bankers, with their profit windfalls protected by secret contracts. The Labor government even re-privatised the mass transport network, and gave the go-ahead for more tramway job losses, after British company, National Express (NX) pulled out of Victoria in 2003.

Echoing Beazley, Bracks and the union leaders have claimed to oppose the Howard government’s WorkChoices legislation, which tears up fundamental rights and working conditions. This is cynical electoral window-dressing. Over the past two years, they have all anxiously sought to defuse the overwhelming opposition among workers to Howard’s laws, telling mass rallies across Victoria that there is no alternative but to cease all industrial resistance and wait for a possible Beazley government in 2007.

This is a continuation of their record since 1999, when the Bracks government continued Kennett’s decision to hand over the state’s industrial relations system to the Howard government. Within months of taking office, Bracks used emergency powers to force striking electricity workers back to work. Over the following two years, his government used police twice—against Feltex textile workers in 2001 and BHP steel workers in 2002—to break picket lines and enforce Howard’s earlier workplace laws. In 2004, metal workers’ union state secretary Craig Johnston was jailed for protesting against strike-breaking after Bracks demanded a union “crackdown” on Johnston’s Workers First faction.

Among the Bracks government’s most vicious features has been its dependence on gambling taxes—it is banking on them for $1.5 billion in revenue next year. These are literally taxes on the poor and working class, feeding off growing financial insecurity and social misery. On average, residents of the northern, western and south-western suburbs of Melbourne lost $800-$1,000 on poker machines last year, about five times more than people in well-off bayside areas. Nevertheless, Labor rejected a recommendation to cap the number of gaming machines at 8 per 1,000 adults.

It is hardly surprising that the corporate elite is once again backing Bracks. The Labor government has outdone Kennett by handing out $4 billion in business tax cuts since 1999, all at the expense of social services and public infrastructure. Bracks has also displayed his readiness to override residents’ and scientists’ concerns about environmental dangers to move toward permitting the deep dredging of Port Philip Bay to accommodate super cargo ships and the building of a toxic dump near the rural city of Mildura.

Last year, Bracks pledged to go further, unveiling his blueprint, *A Third Wave of National Reform*, which Howard and other Labor premiers adopted earlier this year. It pushed for more corporate de-regulation and tax concessions, with Business Council of Australia president Michael Chaney praising Bracks for “demonstrating real leadership on this”. Business leaders openly regard Labor as the most reliable instrument to continue imposing their requirements in partnership with Howard. Bracks has “evinced a willingness to take the lead and work with John Howard rather than just railing against federal failings,” the *Australian Financial Review* enthused.

Far from being a “lesser evil” to the Liberals, Labor’s re-election will only intensify the offensive against working people. This highlights the significance of the Socialist Equality Party’s election campaign. We are offering the only genuine alternative on the basis of socialist policies to the de facto Labor-Liberal coalition. While the mass media and both Labor and Liberal are doing everything they can to bury any real discussion in this election, above all about the issues confronting the working class, we are doing the opposite.

Our campaign’s central aim is the development of a socialist and international movement of the working class against the current economic and political order based on private profit and the nation-state system. I urge all our readers who want to end war, repression and poverty to support our campaign, attend our election meetings, distribute our election statement and consider joining the Socialist Equality Party.

Meet the SEP Candidate

Tuesday, November 14, 7:00 p.m.
Banksia Gardens Community Centre
69-75 Pearcedale Parade Broadmeadows
Melways ref: Map 6 H6

Socialist Equality Party Public Meeting

Tuesday, November 21, 7:00 p.m.
Hume Global Learning Centre
1093 Pascoe Vale Road
Broadmeadows Melways ref: Map 6 H8

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site