Victorian election: Labor government returned to power with big business and media backing

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The Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria was returned to office last Saturday with a marginally reduced majority. The result came as no surprise, with Labor Premier Steve Bracks unanimously endorsed by big business and the media. With the official campaign limited to just three weeks, the shortest time possible, none of the central issues facing working people was addressed. No discussion was permitted on the Iraq war, the growing threat to democratic rights, worsening social inequality or lower living standards.

While some votes are still being tallied, at last count the Labor Party received 43 percent of first preference votes, down from 48 percent in the 2002 election. Labor's reduced vote, however, did not result in any significant gains for the Liberal Party, with the opposition winning just 34 percent of first preference votes, up less than half a percent on 2002.

Due to the undemocratic compulsory preferential voting system, Labor's vote will translate into a large parliamentary majority, with at least 53 of the 88 seats in the lower house, against a minimum of 21 for the Liberals and 8 for the rural-based National Party. Only one independent, Craig Ingram in rural Gippsland, retained his seat. In the upper house, Labor is tipped to win 20 or 21 of the 40 available seats.

Much of the media commentary in the aftermath of the election has focussed on the "power of incumbency". Labor's return to power in Victoria marks the 25th successive federal, state, and territory election held in Australia in which the ruling party was re-elected. In a highly complacent and self-satisfied manner, the media has portrayed this situation as a sign of general popular satisfaction with the status quo.

In fact the opposite is the case. Largely concealed by the media, and lying just beneath the surface of official politics, is immense disaffection and hostility toward the official parliamentary establishment. The existing political set-up provides no outlet for these sentiments. With no fundamental difference between Labor and Liberal policies, election campaigns have become highly artificial affairs.

In a rare admission, a columnist in the *Age* commented last Friday that not many issues were "on the table for inspection... This election has been micromanaged to an unprecedented degree by taxpayer-funded spin doctors. The avoidance of troublesome topics has been crucial to the strategy."

Incumbent governments rely on stoking insecurity and running scare campaigns. Bracks's victory was driven by widespread hostility among ordinary working people toward the Liberal Party, particularly the Howard government's despised WorkChoices industrial legislation. The state Labor government cynically postured as a defender of workers' conditions and an opponent of Howard's industrial laws.

According to the *Age*, Labor spent one-quarter of its advertising budget in the final week of the campaign targeting state Liberal leader Ted Baillieu for his support for WorkChoices. Bracks also warned workers not to risk a return to the "Kennett era," i.e., the 1992-1999 Liberal government of Premier Jeff Kennett, under which social spending was slashed and public schools and hospitals throughout the state shut down.

Bracks's record belies his posturing. The Labor premier picked up where Kennett left off in 1999, and entrenched the Liberals' severe budget cuts and public sector job losses. Bracks has also worked hand in hand with the Howard government in implementing a right-wing, pro-business economic agenda.

In Labor's traditional heartland of the Latrobe Valley, anger with Labor's policies produced an unexpected challenge to the party's stranglehold over two seats—Narracan, which the Liberals won, and Morwell, which remains in doubt but may fall to the Nationals. In Morwell, Lisa Proctor stood as an independent and received almost 9 percent of the vote, after she resigned from her local Labor branch, less than a fortnight before the election,

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complaining that Bracks was ignoring the area. The result, indicative of deep-rooted anti-Labor sentiment, was one of the few moments in the election that failed to follow the officially sanctioned script.

Having secured re-election on the back of a negative vote against the Liberals' federal agenda, Bracks now intends to press ahead further, and has already announced that legislation cutting business taxes will be passed before the end of the year. Other measures will soon follow. The media is demanding that economic reform be accelerated. "Business—mostly ignored during the campaign—will expect the Bracks government to move decisively on other issues hampering Victoria's competitiveness," the *Australian Financial Review* cautioned Labor in its editorial today.

The Liberals' electoral debacle has caused concerns within the ruling elite. While backing Bracks, the media had urged a stronger Liberal vote in order to place more pressure on the government and create the conditions for a genuinely competitive election in four years time. Now, however, even senior Liberal figures admit they are unlikely to have a chance of winning government until 2014. Internal infighting and recriminations will likely follow, though state leader Baillieu is expected to remain opposition leader, largely because no-one else is considered capable.

Despite the mounting crisis of the two-party system, the Greens were unable to capitalise and took just under 10 percent of the vote, equivalent to what they received in 2002. Votes are still being counted in the electorate of Melbourne, but the Greens appear not to have won any of the four inner-city seats they targeted. In the upper house, they won only two or three seats and are unlikely to secure the balance of power as had been widely predicted.

The Greens consciously pitched their election campaign to the political and media establishment. With the protracted disintegration of the Democrats—who received less than one percent of the vote for the Victorian upper house—the Greens have stepped forward to fill the vacuum and play the part of "responsible" third party, working as a parliamentary "watchdog" and helping the next government advance its agenda.

While the Greens attracted significant support among many Melbourne middle-class voters, they proved incapable of making any wider appeal and winning the support of workers hostile to the "free market" agenda of both the Bracks government and the Liberals. The Greens also refused to issue an appeal to antiwar sentiment, and throughout the campaign remained silent on the "war on terror," Australia's participation in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Howard government's military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

The Greens also appear to have lost support after they reached a preference-swapping arrangement with the Liberals. The deal aimed at securing inner-city seats for the Greens, but appears to have backfired after Labor mounted an expensive mail-drop operation in the final days of the campaign. While Labor's condemnations of the Greens' manoeuvre were utterly hypocritical, it likely struck a chord with people disgusted with the politics of unprincipled electoral horsetrading.

Family First, a right-wing Christian fundamentalist outfit, received more than 4 percent of the upper house vote but appears unlikely to win a seat. People Power, a new right-wing populist party that received significant media coverage in the election campaign, received less than one percent.

The "informal" vote, that is, those ballots not validly filled in, was 4.5 percent, up from 3.4 in 2002. Many of these votes would have been deliberately spoiled by voters looking to register a protest against all the available candidates.

In the working class suburban electorate of Broadmeadows, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate, Will Marshall, received 425 votes or 1.5 percent of the total. This is a relatively small, but nevertheless significant vote. After a very short, three-week campaign, it represents a conscious turn toward a socialist alternative by an important layer of workers and youth. Due to anti-democratic party registration electoral laws, Marshall's name appeared on the ballot without the SEP being listed alongside, and the party's campaign faced a deliberate media blackout.

The SEP—the only party in the campaign that provided an independent perspective for the working class—made a significant impact in Broadmeadows. Party campaigners distributed 17,000 election manifestos, 2,000 in Turkish for immigrant workers, and hundreds of people provided their contact details for further discussion. The response to the SEP's campaign indicates that growing numbers of people are looking to take a stand and take up the struggle to build a genuine alternative to the entire political establishment.

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