

Australia: Federal and state by-elections reveal growing disaffection with Labor

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Voters in two predominantly working class electorates registered their growing opposition to the Labor Party at both the federal and state levels in two by-elections held on June 28.

In the Victorian federal seat of Gippsland an election was triggered by the resignation of Nationals parliamentarian Peter McGauran. The Nationals again won the seat they have held for 86 years, with candidate Darren Chester securing 40 percent of the primary vote. Their vote, however, was down 8 percent from the last election due to the decision of the Liberal Party to stand a candidate, which they did not do in the last federal election. The Liberals won 20.5 percent of the primary vote—taking a sizable number of votes from the Labor Party as well, whose candidate won just 28 percent of the primary vote, also 8 percent lower than last in November's poll. On a two-party preferred basis, the Nationals won 62 percent of the vote—a positive swing of 6.4 percent.

The result makes clear that just seven months after Rudd Labor won office, there is growing dissatisfaction and anger with the government over the rapidly rising cost of living and growing financial pressures on ordinary working people.

Gippsland is categorised as a rural seat, with both dairy and beef farming in the region. But the diverse electorate also contains working class areas, with extensive coal mining and power generating operations, as well as the Longford Gas plant that supplies much of Victoria's gas. Morwell, a town that is home to coal mining and power generation, has been hard hit by the privatisation of these industries over the last two decades. Unemployment is rife, officially standing at 10 percent, well over twice the national average. The median household income of \$787 is more than 25 percent less than the national figure of \$1,027. Significantly, Labor lost ground in these areas that were once regarded as its heartland. In the mining and

power generating regions of Morwell and Churchill, the party suffered swings of up to 10 percent.

Labor's poor result shocked party strategists, who had hoped to utilise Rudd's reported standing in the opinion polls to make some inroads into the Nationals' vote. The prime minister, together with Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and other senior ministers, made several visits to the area in the lead-up to the election.

Social issues emerged as the most potent. Rising fuel prices have hit those in rural and regional areas hard, with prices significantly higher than in the cities. Those living in areas such as Gippsland—which have minimal public transport infrastructure—are also frequently forced to drive long distances.

Pensioners in Gippsland have been particularly hard hit. Lorraine Veenman, from Bairnsdale, told a local newspaper: "I live on my own and all my savings are gone and I'm living pension to pension and I'm finding it so hard to pay my rates. I go out maybe once a week if I can and with all the prices going up I can't buy my food half the time, it's just too much."

The National Party attempted to capitalise on such discontent by launching a petition for an immediate \$30 a week increase to the aged pension.

"The people of Gippsland have said loud and clear their concerns about impacts on household budgets," Rudd declared after the vote. The global oil crisis, and rising interest rates had hit the family budget hard and "the government has taken tough decisions, including cutting government expenditure," he continued. "It's our resolve, as the government, to take these tough decisions for our long term future. It means that on the way through that there will be political set-backs—I understand that."

In other words, the Labor government will press ahead with its right-wing, "free market" agenda regardless, placing the full burden of the economic crisis onto the back of the working class.

On the same day as the Gippsland by-election, voters in the working class western suburbs of Melbourne voted in a state by-election that was called after Labor's former police minister, Andre Haermeyer, quit his seat of Kororoit. The electorate includes the suburbs of Caroline Springs, Albanvale, Kings Park and parts of Deer Park, Rockbank, St Albans and Truganina.

Labor retained the seat, but only after suffering an enormous 16 percent swing against it. With 48.7 percent of the primary vote, Labor was forced to preferences, whereas in the 2006 state election it won 62 percent of the primary vote, making Kororoit the party's third safest in the state. Independent candidate Les Twentyman, a youth worker, won 20.4 percent of the primary vote, and ended up with 41 percent of the two-candidate preferred vote.

Twentyman capitalised on the widespread sense that Labor had neglected the electorate for decades, confident it would always remain in the party's hands. "We don't see that much gets done around here, and we need a lot of change," 59-year-old Denise Gardner told the *Herald Sun*. "There needs to be an attitude change. Instead of the west being treated like an underdog, treat us the same as anybody else."

An important issue was the lack of public transport and infrastructure. There are three extremely dangerous level crossings in St. Albans, which feature a total of 250 gate closures a day, causing significant traffic dislocation. One crossing at Main Road has been described as the fourth most dangerous level crossing in the state, with nine people killed there in the last decade. The Labor government has ignored residents' demands for an underground crossing.

Healthcare was also a major concern among voters. Sunshine Hospital, which serves the area, cannot cope with the rapidly increasing demand for its services. Last year the hospital had 1,382 people on its publicly declared waiting list. An investigative report by the *Age*, however, showed that the hospital, desperate to prevent its image from being tarnished, did not report another 1,582 people waiting for treatment and procedures as they were categorised as "not ready" for surgery.

The Labor Party's candidate, Marlene Kairouz, only secured her position after a bout of internal faction fighting—complete with branch stacking allegations—within Labor's right-wing faction.

Kairouz headed a filthy campaign against Twentyman. One leaflet declared that "a vote for Twentyman is a vote for the Liberals", while another featured a lurid picture of syringes and accused the candidate of "placing your kids

at risk" because he wanted to "build heroin injecting rooms in your suburb". Photographs of Twentyman's house were also posted on a right-wing internet blog site.

Twentyman—a former "Victorian of the Year" and prominent youth worker who is regularly cited in the media whenever social problems in Melbourne's western suburbs are raised—campaigns on a platform that was largely devoid of policy commitments but stressed the need to "elect someone who respects the west".

The so-called independent candidate was backed by a number of figures who consciously utilised his campaign as a "left" safety valve for the Labor Party. His campaign manager was Phil Cleary, a union official in the Electrical Trade Union (ETU) and former independent parliamentarian for the northern Melbourne seat of Wills. Cleary won this seat in 1992 after waging a nationalist campaign promoting the imposition of tariff barriers, particularly for the textile industry. Twentyman's campaign was largely financed by the ETU, with union leader Dean Mighell donating \$40,000 on the basis that, "He is more Labor-oriented and has more Labor values than the ALP candidate".

Mighell and Cleary represent those more conscious layers of the Labor and union bureaucracy who recognise that the Labor Party's lurch to the right has opened up an enormous political vacuum, particularly in working class areas. The essential function of campaigns such as Twentyman's is to ensure that working people remain trapped within the parliamentary framework. Throughout the campaign, the "independent" stressed that he was directing his preferences to the Labor Party, and sought to promote the illusion that making Kororoit a marginal seat would force the Brumby government to act in the interests of ordinary people in the western suburbs. On the contrary, the real task facing the working class is to develop a new mass party based on a socialist and internationalist program. This can only go forward through a conscious political break with the Labor Party and the trade unions, and their pro-capitalist agenda—as well as with their "left" accomplices such as Mighell and Twentyman.



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