

Australia: Huge swing against Labor in Northern Territory election

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Growing disenchantment with the federal Labor government and its state and territory counterparts saw thousands of voters deserting the party or refusing to vote in the Northern Territory (NT) elections on August 9.

While the NT government, led by Chief Minister Paul Henderson, scraped back into office with a fragile one-seat majority, the result was a disaster for Labor. The party lost six parliamentarians, including three ministers, with swings against Labor MPs as high as 18 percent in some electorates. Voting is compulsory in the NT, but the participation rate was only 75 percent, a twenty-year low, with hundreds of remote area indigenous people, who have traditionally supported Labor, deciding not to vote.

Labor now has only 13 seats (down from 19) in the 25-member NT Legislative Assembly, with the opposition Country Liberal Party (CLP) holding 11 seats (an increase of 7) and one independent. Ministers who lost their seats were Chris Natt (Mines and Energy), Len Keily (Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage) and Matthew Bonson (Sport & Recreation).

Labor Party leaders and journalists were clearly stunned by the result, the first general election since the federal ballot that brought the Rudd Labor government to power on November 24 last year. Journalist Paul Toohey from Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper wrote on polling day that Labor would be returned to power "at a gentle canter". Two days later he attempted to explain away the result by declaring that the "Northern Territory is not, by nature, a Labor kind of place".

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd could only state the obvious, declaring that the NT election was a warning that no politician could afford to ignore. Told about the result on his way back from the Beijing Olympics, he spent the next day campaigning in Western Australia, where the state Labor government goes to the polls on September 6 and is expected to face a sizeable protest vote.

Federal ministers claimed that the result was due to "local factors" and had nothing to do with the Rudd government. "I didn't detect many federal issues running through the Northern Territory campaign," Assistant Treasurer Chris Bowen declared, a mantra repeated by Defence Science and Personnel Minister Warren Snowdon, the federal member for Lingiari in the NT.

Notwithstanding these claims, the vote was an unmistakable protest against both the federal and territory Labor governments and follows a similar result in a by-election in Victoria on June 28.

That day saw a 16 percent swing against Labor in the working class state seat of Kororoit in Melbourne's outer western suburbs.

While the CLP gained an average 9 percent swing across the NT, this does not reflect popular support for the party. Before the election there was open speculation that the CLP could collapse and in the last week of the campaign the party made desperate appeals for donations to overcome a \$10,000 shortfall. The CLP was unable to run candidates in two remote NT seats—Arnhem in the Top End and McDonnell in central Australia—allowing Labor to win them unopposed, a first in NT electoral history.

The gains for the CLP were a direct result of a collapse in the Labor vote. In the three Alice Springs seats—Braitling, Araluen and Grotorex—its vote is now at historic lows. In Braitling, Labor came last out of four candidates, with a 15.6 percent swing to the CLP. In Araluen, Labor's vote was two-thirds less than in the 2005 election and in Grotorex, the party received less than 20 percent of the vote.

Another measure of the growing disaffection with Labor was the increased vote for the Greens. In the six electorates the Greens contested—three in Darwin and three in Alice Springs—they recorded an average 15.9 percent of the vote. No Greens candidates were elected but in the Darwin seat of Nightcliff, the party won 23.6 percent of the total vote and in Braitling it easily outpolled the local Labor candidate, the first time the Greens have won more votes than Labor in a Territory election.

The Labor and CLP election campaigns were almost identical, each promising harsher "law and order" measures, expanded industrial development and higher profits for companies. The poverty, unemployment and horrendous social inequality afflicting the NT's Aboriginal population, along with the basic issues confronting all working people, were totally ignored during the 19-day campaign.

Labor leader Henderson announced mandatory sentencing for violent offences and said his government would increase police officers in shopping centres in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs to stop "youth crime" and "anti-social behaviour".

CLP leader Terry Mills declared that NT towns should not become "havens for lawless behaviour" and promised new mandatory sentencing laws, including six months for offenders convicted of serious violent assault, and a night curfew against all under-16-year-olds. Henderson claimed that the Opposition's policy was soft because it gave offenders a "second chance".

The principal targets of these measures are Aboriginal people,

who are being driven from remote communities into the NT's urban centres, and deeper poverty, by the federal government's NT "intervention" measures.

According to the corporate press, the "intervention", which was initiated last year by the Howard government and is still being extended by Rudd, is motivated by concern over the plight of Aboriginal children facing sexual abuse and other social horrors. Its real purpose is to slash welfare, break up remote communities and townships and take control of Aboriginal land.

Among the intervention's draconian measures is the imposition of "income management" on Aboriginal people. Income management compulsorily diverts 50 percent of social welfare and pensions into store- or debit-cards issued by the state-funded welfare agency Centrelink. The Rudd government has imposed this regime on more than 15,000 Aboriginal people in the NT and is now trialing similar measures in non-indigenous communities beyond the NT as means of slashing welfare spending and forcing people into low-paid work.

Labor and the CLP maintained a deafening silence on the "intervention" but it was a key factor in the decline in Labor's support among Aboriginal people, particularly in remote electorates. Although Labor MPs were reelected from these areas, the participation rate dropped dramatically.

In Stuart, for example, a huge electorate covering the Tanami Desert in the west and extending from the edge of Arnhem Land in the north to Yuendumu and T-Tree in central Australia, just over 52 percent of electors voted. Yuendumu is NT's largest remote Aboriginal community and its residents have publicly protested the "intervention" during the past 12 months.

In Arafura, which includes the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin, the Coburg Peninsula, Kakadu National Park and western Arnhem Land, only 60.8 percent of registered voters participated. More than 75 percent of the electorate is indigenous.

In Nhulunbuy, only 59.8 percent of electors voted, in a seat that covers the mining town of Nhulunbuy and numerous Aboriginal communities, including Galiwinku and Yirrkala. In Barkly, which is 60 percent indigenous, only 65.1 percent of registered electors participated.

Barbara Shaw from Mt Nancy town camp in Alice Springs told the *World Socialist Web Site* that large numbers of Aborigines were "disillusioned" with Labor's continuation of the intervention. She said that John Gaynor, a Labor candidate in Alice Springs, was asked to state his position at a public meeting and arrogantly declared that the measures were "good for Aboriginal people and the NT".

"Many Aboriginal people voted Labor in the last federal election because of what Howard and [minister for aboriginal affairs] Brough did to us with the intervention," she said. "But in the last 12 months neither the new Rudd government nor NT Labor has done anything to reverse these destructive policies. In fact, they continue to push them on us. People are really disillusioned and had no confidence in this election. Many just thought, 'why should I care?'"

Disaffection with Labor was also animated by increasing living costs, which have accelerated in recent months. NT teachers are demanding a 15 percent pay rise over two and a half years along

with improved allowances and conditions. Teachers walked out on strike for four hours on August 7, two days before polling day, because the government has only offered a 12 percent rise over three years.

While the cost of living has always been high in the NT, there have been major increases in housing and other basic items over the past two years. Petrol in some NT towns has risen by 70 cents to \$2 a litre in the past 18 months, drastically cutting into the weekly budget of residents who travel long distances in the large and sparsely populated region.

The median weekly rent for a two-bedroom home in Alice Springs has risen by over 22 percent in the past 12 months, on top of a 20 percent rise the previous year. The highest increases in the past year have been for one bedroom units, with a 29.4 percent rise.

Despite increased electoral support for the Greens from former Labor voters, the organisation ignored these social questions and said little about the "intervention". The Greens' vote largely reflected the fact that many NT residents are legitimately concerned about the destruction of the environment—in Alice Springs the party was able to win support because of possible plans for uranium mining just 21 km south of the city, within its water catchment area.

While Greens candidates received much of the protest vote against Labor, their role is to promote illusions in capitalism and the parliamentary system. This was demonstrated by their record in the Tasmanian Labor-led coalition government of 1989 to 1992, when they collaborated in the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs, and in Germany where the Greens ruled in coalition with the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2005, backing German military interventions in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

While disaffection with Labor and the two-party system will inevitably intensify, voting for the Greens or other capitalist parties, or for single issue candidates, or politically abstaining, provide no way forward for working people—indigenous and non-indigenous alike. The NT election results highlight, in fact, the political impasse affecting the working class as a whole. Only by developing a new mass political party of the working class, based on socialist and internationalist principles and policies, can ordinary people defeat the mounting attacks on jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights being unleashed by the territory, state and federal Labor governments. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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