

Australian by-elections record massive anti-Labor swings

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Polls held in the state of New South Wales (NSW) over the weekend signal disaster for the incumbent Labor government led by Premier Nathan Rees. In by-elections held across four working class electorates—Cabramatta, Ryde, Lakemba and Port Macquarie—Labor's vote took an historic plunge with the largest by-election swings against an Australian government since World War II.

The results are yet another nail in the coffin for the NSW Labor government. More fundamentally, they point to the unprecedented volatility of the electorate. No politician can count on traditional political loyalties. Just 12 months ago, the sitting Liberal Prime Minister John Howard was unseated by Labor in the federal seat of Bennelong, which takes in Ryde. Now the area has swung against Labor by a massive 23 percent. Even more disastrous was Labor's showing in Cabramatta, previously the second-safest Labor seat in NSW. There, ALP candidate and local mayor Nick Lalich suffered a 23 percent anti-Labor swing. In Lakemba, vacated by sacked Labor premier Morris Iemma, the party was hit by a humiliating 13 percent swing.

The state ALP is visibly haemorrhaging. Were the weekend's by-election swings repeated at state elections in 2011, Labor would face oblivion. The party would lose 40 of its 52 seats. The ALP's state general secretary Karl Bitar has even warned party officials that Labor may fail to win the 10 seats required to retain its party status in the Legislative Assembly (the state's lower chamber), leading to a withdrawal of parliamentary funding and privileges.

The by-election outcome shows that the new premier Nathan Rees has failed to gain any traction with an electorate alienated by 13 years of unrelenting attacks on public health, education, transport and basic infrastructure. In particular, an autocratic attempt to privatise state electricity assets—a big ticket item demanded by business—was opposed by 85 percent of the electorate. Rees's elevation followed the dumping in

September of then Premier Morris Iemma, the resignation of his deputy John Watkins and the petulant walk-out by reviled health minister Reba Meagher. The cabinet makeover, imposed by Labor's factional chiefs, has resolved none of the underlying issues.

Despite the huge swings, the opposition Liberal Party has little to celebrate. On Saturday night Liberal leader Barry O'Farrell told party supporters in Ryde "[t]his result is history making for the past, present and future." But the ALP disaster will not end the factional blood-letting in the state and federal Liberal Party. Although the implosion of state Labor apparently assures a Liberal victory at the 2011 NSW general elections, long-running tensions within the Liberal Party and between the Liberals and their National Party coalition partners may ultimately deprive the coalition of office.

The by-election in the state seat of Port Macquarie was contested by the Nationals' Lesley Williams, a local nurse, but won by an "independent" Peter Besseling. In line with coalition convention, the Liberals did not field a candidate against Williams. But this "no-contest" arrangement is under heavy fire from key state and federal Liberal MPs who see the Nationals as a spent force and advocate either cutting them loose or subsuming them into the Liberal Party.

Relations between the coalition partners are toxic. Senior federal Liberal MPs, Alby Schultz and Bill Heffernan, campaigned for the independent Besseling, reportedly distributing election how-to-vote cards and wearing Besseling T-shirts during the campaign. Schultz explained his position: "The National Party is becoming irrelevant, whether they like it or not... They are the worst perpetrators of opportunistic politics anywhere in Australia."

NSW Nationals' leader Andrew Stoner fired back at Schultz during a press conference yesterday, telling reporters: "If I had my way, I'd march him out at dawn,

put a blindfold on him and shoot him." The outburst forced Liberal leader Barry O'Farrell into damage control, with Stoner calling a second press conference to say that his comments were not meant to be taken seriously.

While the Nationals face an existential crisis, losing ground to Independents across rural and regional Australia, the implications of this decline do not bode well for the Liberal Party. In NSW the National Party has 13 members in the Legislative Assembly and the Liberals have traditionally relied on National Party support to form government.

The Greens: "Sensible and mainstream"

The collapse of voter loyalty to Labor and the coalition parties has seen a flow of votes to the Greens, the self-nominated "third force" in Australian parliamentary politics. In the NSW by-elections, the Greens won up to 12.7 percent of votes and in general parliamentary elections also held last weekend in the Australian Capital Territory, which takes in Canberra, the Greens obtained 3 seats and now hold the balance of power. The ALP and the Liberals each took 7 seats.

Thrust into the role of king-maker, the Greens have emphasised their reliability to the political establishment. Greens' federal leader Bob Brown, said his party was now seen as "sensible, optimistic and mainstream". To prove the point, in the wake of the global economic crisis, Greens Senators in the federal parliament have in recent weeks been working closely with the Rudd Labor government to push through its budget measures.

Last weekend's NSW and ACT elections are only the latest in a series of recent polls which have revealed a sharp turn against the ALP. Labor won power federally in elections last November on a wave of anti-Howard government sentiment. According to the most recent opinion polls, the Rudd government in Canberra is sitting on historically high levels of voter approval. But the massive electoral swings against Labor at state and local level demonstrate just how tenuous that approval is.

Among ordinary voters, there is a widespread alienation and distrust of the entire political establishment. At polling booths in Cabramatta, Lakemba and Ryde, voters expressed their opposition to both the major parties and had little faith that the elections would resolve matters. Steve from West Ryde told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"When you look at the structure of the parties you see Labor starting to look just like the Liberals. Whichever party is in, there have been problems with the schools and hospitals and I don't see that changing." Chris Kelly, voting with his wife, expressed a similar sentiment: "Probably five out of 10 people walking through that gate wish they weren't here. They feel that they're not getting answers. About 70 percent come here because if they don't they know they'll get a fine."

There was widespread concern about the world financial crisis. Many workers told the WSWS they had already lost large portions of their superannuation, while others were personally affected by mortgage stress, rising prices and job losses. Tony, 42, from Cabramatta said: "Everything's going up except for wages. It is very tough. I've lost a fair bit of money on my super as well—over \$20,000. I'm a supervisor, just an ordinary blue collar worker. I've been working for over 22 years and I've always put into super. I've lost a substantial amount. It's very scary. In the future, will there be any super left?"

Labor's hold will only become more tenuous as the global recession hits Australia harder in coming months. Rudd's knee-jerk reaction to the financial meltdown (a paltry \$10 billion spent on Christmas handouts and grants for housing construction) will be followed by severe austerity measures. At state level, NSW Premier Nathan Rees, is already talking openly in these terms. Faced with plunging state revenues as a result of the sharp decline in the property market, the Premier has warned that the state's AAA credit rating will be defended at all costs. All public services are ripe for the razor, "I don't want to get into where we're going to slash," Rees said. "But what I am deadly serious about is a robust response to the fiscal situation that we face... I'm not ruling anything in or out. I want maximum flexibility."



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