

Australia: Large anti-Labor swing in Victorian state by-election

Our reporters
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In another indication of growing disaffection, the Victorian Labor government suffered a huge 12.3 percent swing against it in a by-election in the state electorate of Altona on Saturday. For the first time in the history of Altona, an electorate in Melbourne's working class western suburbs, Labor's primary vote dropped below 50 percent. Whereas in 2006 the party received 60.6 percent of the primary vote, on Saturday it gained only 47.5 percent.

The by-election was triggered by the resignation of transport minister Lynne Kosky, supposedly for "family reasons". Her move was, however, widely connected to her disastrous ministerial record, which included overseeing the long delayed and botched introduction of a new public transport ticketing system. Kosky's successor in Altona, Jill Hennessy, a 37-year-old former state ALP president, retained the seat only after the distribution of preferences. The Liberal Party received 35 percent of the primary vote (up by more than 11 percent from 2006) and the Greens 10.4 percent (up 2 percent).

According to provisional results updated yesterday by the Victorian Electoral Commission, only 86 percent of enrolled voters cast a ballot, despite the threat of a fine for failing to do so. The Labor Party mounted a desperate doorknocking drive on the day of the election to try to get more voters to show up. Of all ballots cast, 4.8 percent were invalid, suggesting that a considerable number of people deliberately spoiled their vote as a gesture of hostility towards all the candidates.

The result has implications for both the state government of Premier John Brumby and the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. A Victorian election is scheduled for this November and a federal election is due later this year. Altona is symptomatic of the deep disaffection with all the establishment parties that has seen enormous electoral volatility in several elections in recent years. But the by-election also reflects more specific anger with Labor amid declining working class living standards caused by joblessness and rising costs of living, and rapidly deteriorating public education, health, transport and other social services.

The Altona electorate includes the suburbs of Altona, Laverton, Point Cook, and parts of Hoppers Crossing. It is a significant industrial centre, incorporating one of Australia's largest concentrations of petro-chemical plants, and has a larger than average component of young people and families. The electorate encompasses growing tracts of new housing developments built on rezoned industrial and agricultural land, with the number of registered voters increasing from 42,000 to 48,000 since 2006. New housing

developments typically have few facilities or social infrastructure other than shopping centres. Moreover, many parts of Altona are impoverished; in 2006, for example, Laverton had an official unemployment rate of 12 percent, more than twice the national and Victorian rate.

The Brumby government has promoted itself as among the most pro-business administrations in Australia. It has developed "private-public partnerships" in essential infrastructure and services, delivering investors with windfall profits, while slashing state taxes and charges to attract investment. At the same time it has run down and deliberately under-funded vital social services, including transport, health, and education. It has led the way, for example, in promoting reactionary pilot public education programs, such as introducing so-called performance pay for teachers, and "Teach for Australia" in which untrained university graduates are inserted into classrooms.

In September last year, the anniversary of Labor's tenth year in power, the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry publicly lauded the government, as the *Age* reported, "for being business-friendly and probably the best state Labor government in the country".

Since taking over in 2007 from his predecessor Steve Bracks, Premier Brumby has demonstrated his ruthlessness in suppressing any challenge from the working class to his government's right-wing agenda. The government opposed industrial campaigns waged by several public sector workers—including teachers, nurses, and ambulance paramedics—and with the assistance of the trade unions imposed real wage cuts and more onerous working conditions. Last year Brumby called out riot police to violently confront a construction workers' picket outside the West Gate Bridge project.

The Altona by-election campaign highlighted growing anger over deteriorating social services and infrastructure. Victorian Liberal leader Ted Baillieu attempted to capitalise on figures indicating that in 2008-2009, 2,900 patients at the Altona region's three public hospitals were placed on secret waiting lists. Public transport, including Kosky's record, was also a major issue. On the eve of the by-election, both suburban train lines in the region collapsed due to storms, stranding hundreds of commuters returning home from work.

Environmental issues were also prominent. On February 9, in the latter stages of the campaign, one of Mobil's 10-million-litre petrol storage tanks spilled 20,000 litres of fuel in the area. The Melbourne

Fire Brigade expressed fears that the ageing tank may collapse and flood surrounding wetlands. Mobil's oil tanks are between 40 and 60 years old and pose a serious environmental and safety danger. To update the ageing infrastructure, ensure adequate safeguards, and separate the petrochemical plants from suburban areas would require billions of dollars of investment—a project that big business and the Labor government are not interested in pursuing.

Despite the large anti-Labor swing, Brumby initially declared the Altona election a “very strong” and “fantastic” result. Later, however, the premier changed his tune, describing the result as “a bit of a kick in the bum for all of us”. He declared he would “heed the message that people want us to lift our game”, specifically raising transport and crime issues.

This bogus display of humility was no doubt designed to address mounting concerns among Labor apparatchiks over the upcoming state election. The *Herald Sun* reported on Monday that a swing of less than 4 percent across the state could see the Coalition win an extra nine lower house seats and the Greens three, potentially resulting in a hung parliament, with the Greens holding the balance of power.

This remains to be seen. In Altona, despite bitter opposition to Labor, the Greens' candidate managed to lift the party's vote by just 2 percent. The Greens are an integral part of the official political establishment, and their focus is now to demonstrate their “responsibility” and willingness to work with either the Labor or Liberal parties, amid business and media concerns over the implications of a potential hung parliament.

The misnamed ex-left petty bourgeois outfit Socialist Alliance stood a candidate in Altona, receiving 1.5 percent of the vote. The purpose of the Alliance's campaign was to channel voter anger back behind the establishment parties; the party preferenced the Greens followed by Labor, once again on the basis that the ALP was a “lesser evil” to the Liberals. The Socialist Alliance campaign was barely distinguishable from that of the Greens, featuring a series of reformist slogans centring on environmental issues.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with several Altona residents on election day.

At a polling booth in Hoppers Crossing, Laura Parker, a teachers' aide, commented: “My biggest concern is transport—the trains not running on time and the Myki card [computerised ticketing system] fiasco. Whatever Kosky has put her hands to—like public transport—it has been a complete disaster.”

Asked about the education system she replied: “I had a look at the *My School* [school test scores ranking system] web site—I work at a school which has scored quite low. I think that the government needs to do proper research—overall this *My School* is a bad idea.

“I think that the government is doing that to make themselves look good, and I don't think that they give enough funding to the lower schools. I think the schools with lower scores need more money and facilities. I think the higher rated schools have better facilities. The

better schools have more money being generated and the lower schools don't have that. Our school has a high migrant population and they don't always have much because of their situation at home—so we miss out on a lot of things that other schools get. Here in the Western suburbs you have to fight for every single thing, you have to justify everything, and then when you have it you have to fight to hold on to it. We need more recreation facilities—kids need to be able to play sports, all sorts of things.

“I think what will happen is that a lot of schools will be forced to merge, which will cause a lot of problems. I think it will cause more teachers to lose their jobs.”

Asked about the economy and its importance in the election, she answered: “Things are hard, interest rates go up, the cost of living is going up, everything is going up—you are struggling to stay five steps ahead—it seems like it is always ten steps backwards. This is going to be a great concern for our children later on in life—where are they going to go? What are they going to do? I think in general everyone is struggling.

“I don't have any faith in the major political parties. I didn't vote the same way as I did last time. I changed my vote because we need change. I think we are going backwards in relationship to everything. Schooling, transport system, the pensioners—we are chasing our tail all the time. I voted for 20 years for one party but now I have changed because I haven't seen improvements.”

Polling booths in the Point Cook area, which features new suburban estates, recorded an anti-Labor swing of up to 15 percent. Joe Blake, an engineer in the automotive industry, said: “I think the main issue in this election, and the state election, is the total ineptitude of the Brumby government to address any of the issues that are facing the state—transport, education, hospitals, population growth, and infrastructure—all those big issues that face the nation. The Australian Labor Party in Victoria has been hopeless. I helped vote them in and I'll help vote them out.

“I think the government has neglected these areas because they are incompetent. I think Brumby is as arrogant as all hell. [Former Liberal premier] Kennett was getting the same way; he got to the point where he thought he was so powerful that he didn't have to think. He objected to any scrutiny and I think Brumby is the same. He went up to the hills after the fires and demonstrated a lot of empathy for the people that got burned out—but that's all he has done. In relation to Black Saturday he has done bugger all. In relation to anything else, I consider Victoria to be the ‘don't do’ state.”



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