

Australia: Labor Party suffers substantial losses in state elections

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Elections held in South Australia and Tasmania on Saturday have seen a large shift against the incumbent Labor governments in both states. While votes are still being counted and several seats remain in dispute, it appears that the South Australian government of Premier Mike Rann will retain power with a slender parliamentary majority, but in Tasmania, the government of Premier David Bartlett has lost its majority. The Greens now hold the balance of power in the Tasmanian parliament, and can determine whether a minority Labor or Liberal government is formed.

The Liberals' apparent inability to win power in South Australia or secure a parliamentary majority in Tasmania underscores that the anti-Labor electoral shift reflects mounting hostility with the pro-business agenda of both the major parties. Within the existing parliamentary framework, however, this opposition can find no expression. While the Greens posture as "left" opponents of the major parties, they share the same pro-capitalist perspective and work assiduously to ensure the stability of the entire bourgeois parliamentary set-up. The result is a deepening political impasse, with profound, albeit inchoate opposition and anger, periodically punctuated by volatile election results.

Ministers in the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd have declared that the state results have no wider significance, but the reality is that the votes have increased the government's concerns over rising hostility ahead of this year's federal election.

In South Australia, with 73 percent of the vote counted so far, Labor suffered a 7.3 percent "swing" against it, compared with the last election in 2006. The Rann government is predicted to retain 25 of its 28 seats, with the Liberals winning 18, and independents 4. Liberal leader Isobel Redmond, however, is yet to concede defeat.

If, as looks likely, Labor again forms government, it will do so having lost the two-party preferred vote. Labor won just 38 percent of tallied primary votes, the Liberals 41.4 percent, the Greens 7.8 percent (up 1.4 percent from 2006), and right-wing

Christian outfit Family First 5.3 percent (down 0.6 percent).

The lack of correspondence between the parties' primary vote totals and their share of parliamentary seats is due the fact that Labor retained several closely fought electorates, while registering a major reduction in votes in many of the party's "safe" working class seats. Several government ministers suffered swings of more than 10 percent. In the seat of Taylor, in Adelaide's outer northern suburbs, Labor won despite a 14.4 percent swing; in Enfield, covering Adelaide's inner northern suburbs, there was a 13.8 percent swing against Labor; in the electorate of Little Para (formerly Elizabeth), which covers part of Adelaide's outer northern suburbs, there was a 11.4 percent swing.

First elected in 2002, the Rann government has been among the most right-wing state governments in the country. His re-election was endorsed both by the Murdoch press and business. The premier has repeatedly sought to incite reactionary "law and order" campaigns and has enacted draconian legislation. Labor has also boasted of its pro-business measures, attracting international and inter-state investment, particularly in the mining and defence manufacturing sectors.

Workers in other sectors of manufacturing have been particularly hard hit by the global economic crisis, especially the car industry. Several car component suppliers in the state, including tyre-maker Bridgestone, have closed down or announced bankruptcy. General Motors Holden, working hand in hand with the trade unions, has imposed one week on, one week off shifts, slashing workers' wages at its Elizabeth plant.

One of the Rann government's most prominent attacks on the working class was a legislative change to the WorkCover scheme, reducing injured workers' compensation payments by 20 percent after 13 weeks. Speaking on election night, the premier said that the WorkCover issue had affected support for the government among Labor's "base". In reality, however, the Labor Party no longer has any genuine base of support in the working class. The electoral volatility that has become a feature of elections throughout the country reflects the widespread

understanding that there are few, if any, programmatic differences between the Labor and Liberal parties and that each defends the interests of big business.

In Tasmania, with 84 percent of the vote so far tallied, Labor suffered an enormous 12.1 percent swing. It won 37.1 percent of the primary vote, the Liberals 39.1 percent (up 7.2 percent from 2006), and the Greens 21.3 percent (up 4.6 percent). The state's electoral system is based on a single transferable vote (Hare-Clark) proportional representation method; Labor is anticipated to finish with 10 seats, the Liberals also 10, and the Greens 5.

As in South Australia, the central orientation of the Labor government was towards meeting the demands of business. Among its "achievements", hailed by sections of the media, was its announcement last year that a planned \$1 billion new hospital in Hobart would be scrapped due to public revenue shortfalls caused by the economic downturn.

Amid intense hostility towards the major parties, the Murdoch press issued pleading editorials for voters to vote for either Liberal or Labor rather than the Greens. Likewise, past Tasmanian premiers, Labor and Liberal, issued a joint statement during the campaign urging a vote for either of the major parties. In addition, Labor ran a series of dirty tricks campaigns targeting the Greens, including a leafleting and automated telephone message operation falsely accusing them of favouring the legalisation of heroin. This, however, appeared to backfire, with Premier Bartlett ending the "robo-calls" after a spate of negative publicity. The Greens' vote was their highest in any Australian election.

The Greens' campaign was marked by its duplicity. On the one hand, they made an appeal to widespread concerns over joblessness (at 6.4 percent, Tasmania has the highest official unemployment rate by state), rising costs of living, deteriorating social services and infrastructure, health, and education. Unlike in previous elections, environmental issues were not prominent in their campaign. On the other hand, the Greens assured investors and the media that they were above all concerned to maintain parliamentary stability and promote business confidence. This dual-track campaign is indicative of the Greens essential political function—serving as a "left" trap, preventing the hostility among workers and youth towards Labor from developing in a direction potentially threatening to the official political framework.

While it remains to be seen which of the major parties will form a minority government, it appears increasingly likely that the Liberals will strike a deal with the Greens to take office. Labor leader David Bartlett has ruled out talking with the Greens, while the Liberals' head Will Hodgman has been far

more circumspect, refusing to rule out offering the Greens MPs cabinet positions.

Greens leader Nick McKim has left little doubt that he will accept such an offer. During the campaign he condemned Bartlett and Hodgman's public rejection of a power sharing deal with the Greens, warning that "investor confidence will plummet". He has now declared his willingness to enter into private negotiations with both Labor and Liberal, without any preconditions—meaning that he is prepared to ditch any or all of the Greens' policies. "No party can expect to get all of its policies through the parliament," he declared. "Our hand remains extended to both David Bartlett and Will Hodgman. We want to work constructively with either or both of those people."

Further attempting to bolster the Greens' credibility within official circles, Bob Brown, the party's federal leader, released a public statement yesterday titled "State election results consolidate Greens' mainstream status", declaring that "it is time the Island State's cabinet was made up of the best talent from all three parties or, at least, the two which form government".

The Greens' advocacy of a tripartite "grand coalition" again confirms that they are a thoroughly bourgeois party with no principled differences with the major parties.

That such a call is made at the point where there is mounting media and business pressure for austerity drives at both the federal and state levels—with massive cuts to public spending and social infrastructure investment being demanded—amounts to an advance pledge of support by the Greens for precisely such an agenda. And the "environmental" party has definite form—the 1989–1992 Tasmanian Labor-Green "Accord" government attacked public sector workers and slashed spending to resolve a huge deficit crisis. There is no question but that the working class will face far more regressive measures from a Green-supported Tasmanian government in the period ahead.



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