

Business concerns over Greens and threat of hung parliament dominate Victorian election debate

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Last night's televised debate between Victorian Premier John Brumby and opposition Liberal leader Ted Baillieu was dominated by the implications of the rise of the Greens and the threat of a hung parliament after the November 27 vote.

Opinion polls record the Greens receiving up to 19 percent support, reflecting unprecedented hostility towards both major parties. As well as increasing their numbers in the state parliament's upper house, the Greens may win for the first time several seats in the lower house, potentially allowing them to determine who forms the next government. This is causing widespread unease in ruling circles over the disintegration of the two-party system and concerns over whether the next government will prove able to implement the agenda being dictated by big business and finance capital—austerity measures involving deep public spending cuts and public sector sackings.

The first question put to Brumby and Baillieu in the debate concerned the Greens and the threat of a hung parliament. The issue was then discussed for more than fifteen minutes—one-quarter of the hour-long debate—with the debate moderator posing several more questions and interjections by all three panel journalists, the ABC's Josephine Cafagna, the *Age*'s Paul Austin, and the *Herald Sun*'s Stephen McMahon.

Baillieu was repeatedly pressed to declare whether the Liberal Party would direct its preferences to Labor ahead of the Greens in several inner-city electorates. He declined, insisting that a decision would be made later in the campaign. The issue has triggered infighting within the opposition, with several senior Liberal Party figures, including former prime minister John Howard, urging that preferences be directed to Labor ahead of the Greens.

Baillieu's problem is that, on the one hand, it is highly unlikely the Liberals could win office without preferencing the Greens in the four closely contested inner seats of Melbourne, Richmond, Brunswick, and Northcote. This could help the Greens over the line and create the possibility of a Liberal-led minority government. On the other hand, key sections of business and the media want Labor returned with a clear parliamentary majority and are exerting pressure on the Liberal leader to effectively concede

the inner electorates to Labor, thus avoiding the instability associated with a hung parliament.

During the debate, Premier Brumby pointedly referred to unnamed “business leaders” who had told him their concerns over the prospect of Liberal preferences delivering Greens' victories in inner city electorates.

The *Herald Sun*'s Stephen McMahon aggressively challenged Baillieu on this point, suggesting that he was alienating the Liberal Party's “core support base” by refusing to rule out a preference deal with the Greens. The Murdoch tabloid has been running a campaign in recent days urging the Liberals to preference Labor. In a comment on last night's event published in today's *Herald Sun*, John Ferguson declared, “Take the Greens out of the debate and Mr Baillieu probably won on points”, describing the Liberal leader's stance as “stubborn” and concluding that “this preferencing debate is threatening to derail Mr Baillieu's entire campaign”.

The Greens are not a “left-wing” “extremist” party as the Murdoch media would have it. They are a bourgeois establishment party, seeking to enter government with either Labor or Liberal in the event of a hung parliament, as they have done already in Tasmania and at the federal level in Canberra. Decisive sections of the ruling elite nevertheless fear that a minority government dependent on the Greens for passing legislation will prove too weak and distracted to successfully advance the kind of right-wing economic “reforms” now deemed necessary.

This is why Rupert Murdoch himself made a highly unusual intervention into the state election campaign, publicly denouncing the Greens as a threat to the economy. His extraordinary outburst was followed by the *Herald Sun*'s scurrilous slander campaign against the Greens' candidate in the seat of Melbourne, and its demand that the Liberal Party direct preferences to Labor.

The rest of the dismal and unedifying debate pointed to the bipartisanship between Labor and Liberal on virtually every policy issue. Brumby and Baillieu vied to outdo one another in outlining their pro-business credentials, at the same time promoting their

near identical plans for an unprecedented increase in police numbers and expansion of draconian police powers.

Baillieu attempted to appeal to widespread disaffection and anger with the Labor government, in office since 1999. He referred to “significant problems” in public transport, public hospitals, the maintenance of roads in rural areas and urban planning. Baillieu also feigned sympathy for working people facing escalating costs of living—referring to water and power bills and government fees and charges—though this was one especially unconvincing moment for the multi-millionaire scion of one of Victoria’s oldest establishment families. Moreover, in none of the “problem” areas identified by Baillieu did he outline any policies capable of resolving the situation.

Only on the question of “law and order” did the Liberal leader elaborate a series of worked-out and costly policy pledges, centring on the employment of another 1,700 police officers and a “zero tolerance” approach on crime and legislation, ensuring lengthier prison sentences.

On these issues, the Labor government has gone even further. Earlier this year, Brumby announced what he described as the “biggest one-off boost to frontline police numbers in Victoria’s history”, with an additional 1,900 cops to be recruited in the next five years. This represents a 17 percent increase in total police numbers. The premier last night boasted that Labor had increased police numbers “every single year we’ve been in government”, adding an extra 2,000 officers since 1999. Brumby also hailed his government’s antidemocratic legislation enhancing police powers, including random stop and searches and urban “lockdowns”, which have overwhelmingly been utilised to target and harass working class youth.

Under the guise of combating street violence and “knife culture”, both of the major parties are orchestrating a serious expansion of the state’s repressive powers. This is directed against the working class, and anticipates the eruption of social struggles in the next period.

Brumby repeatedly declared that the “key issue” in the November 27 election was “who’ll keep the jobs coming”. Yet he made no mention of the deep recession in the manufacturing sector, nor the related unemployment crisis. Victoria has the highest official youth unemployment rate of any state, at 28 percent, while the overall jobless rate in Brumby’s own electorate of Broadmeadows stands at 15.9 percent. His Labor government has not implemented a single relief or public works program to alleviate the social disaster. Instead, Brumby bragged about its delivery of budget surpluses, a triple A credit rating, and low business taxes.

Only once in last night’s debate was there any hint of the real tasks of the next government. This was when Baillieu was asked to respond to statements made by Alan Stockdale, treasurer in the former Liberal Kennett government (1992-1999). Stockdale said

that the state economy was in almost as bad a state as when Kennett came to office in 1992, noting rising debt and an “underlying budget deficit” concealed by federal government grants. The state opposition leader was asked if he planned to emulate the former Liberal government’s debt and deficit reduction strategy by closing schools and hospitals and sacking public sector workers. Baillieu refused to give a direct answer, dodging repeated questions as to how he would reduce what he described as Victoria’s “rapidly escalating debt” which is “going to be a problem for some time”.

Brumby attempted to capitalise, declaring that Stockdale had “let the cat out of the bag” and accused Baillieu of planning to slash spending on public schools and hospitals and cut public sector jobs.

The exchange reeked of hypocrisy. Brumby heads one of the most ruthlessly pro-business state governments in Australia and his post-election plans are no different in substance to those of Baillieu.

If re-elected, the Victorian Labor government will work hand in hand with the federal minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard in moving to eliminate the budget deficit and public debt by gutting public spending, and undermining key social spending programs including aged care, aged and disability pensions, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and Medicare. These measures have been spelled out in policy prescriptions issued to the Gillard government by the treasury and finance departments. Like their international counterparts, Australia’s federal and state governments are seeking to make the working class bear the brunt of the global capitalist breakdown and to utilise the crisis to push through sweeping pro-business restructuring measures.

The televised debate yesterday again points to the urgent necessity of working people making a conscious political break with the old parties and organisations—including the Labor Party, the unions and the Greens—that have led them into a complete blind alley, and taking up the fight to build a new mass party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program. The development of such a movement is the central purpose of the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign in the state election.



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