

The Victorian election and the crisis of the Australian Labor Party

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The Victorian Labor government's defeat in last Saturday's state election underscores the crisis now wracking the Labor Party throughout Australia.

For decades, Labor governments at both federal and state levels have functioned as direct instruments of the banks and big business, ruthlessly advancing "free market" restructuring measures that have reduced the living standards of millions of ordinary working people. As a result, Labor is deeply despised. In August, the federal government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard lost its majority, becoming the first one-term government to do so since 1931. In March, the Tasmanian government also lost its parliamentary majority and was only able to cling to power through a deal with the Greens. The same month the South Australian Labor government suffered large losses, receiving just 48.4 percent of the two-party preferred vote. It only remained in office due to the vagaries of electoral boundaries. In March next year the disintegrating New South Wales Labor government is expected to suffer an unprecedented rout—according to a recent opinion poll, it has just 23 percent support, while the Queensland Labor government also faces defeat at the next election, due to be held by 2012.

Conceding defeat yesterday afternoon, Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby, however, remained at a loss to explain what had happened. "It wasn't for want of trying, wasn't for want of effort, wasn't for want of a positive vision for the future of our state—it is just the weight of time that took its toll," he declared, referring to the fact that Labor had been in office for 11 years.

Brumby's absurd justification—"it was just the weight of time"—was echoed throughout the media. No-one raised the obvious point: had Labor spent the past eleven years implementing policies that improved living standards and public investment in schools, hospitals, and other services, the "weight of time" would have worked in its favour.

The Victorian election result represents not simply another episode in the two-party "electoral cycle" but rather a

deepening crisis of the entire political establishment. The estrangement of the working class with the Labor Party has entered a new stage.

The period has long since passed when working people gave their active allegiance to Labor and viewed it as a vehicle for transforming society in a progressive, even "socialist", direction. Now, however, even the claims of Labor apologists that the party represents at least a "lesser evil" to the Liberals have lost virtually all traction. The party is widely regarded as no different to the Liberals—just another vehicle for the interests of finance capital against those of the working class. And, in reality, Labor is now only a political party in name only. It has no genuine membership base, few functioning branches, and is entirely dependent on funds from business and the state.

Some senior Labor figures have expressed deep concerns about the significance of the Victorian election. "The result is deeply worrying [for the Labor Party]," former federal powerbroker Graham Richardson told the *Australian*. "One gets the impression that the brand is damaged. That I think is a real worry with obvious wider implications."

The Brumby government was long hailed by the corporate media as the best performing state government in Australia. The *Australian* today reported that the Victorian Liberal Party was able to raise less than \$500,000 from its traditional big business constituency for its election campaign—a pittance compared to what is now typically spent by the major parties on advertising and other election expenses. "Few Liberal donors thought he [Liberal leader Ted Baillieu] was worth writing a cheque for," the *Australian* noted. The opposition had to run "one of the most under-resourced election campaigns ever" and the multi-millionaire, Victorian "blue-blood" Baillieu reportedly poured large sums of his own cash into the campaign.

Hostility to the Labor government was nevertheless so widespread that the opposition managed to secure the 13 seats required for victory. With workers remaining politically trapped within the straitjacket of the two-party parliamentary

system, anti-Labor sentiment translated into a large swing to the Liberals.

Unlike in other recent elections, none of the minor parliamentary parties or so-called independents was able to capitalise on this shift. Broad layers of the population appear to have concluded, in this election, that their experiment with trying to influence the agendas of the major parties through voting for such candidates has been a failure. The independents and especially the Greens have proved themselves to be nothing but an integral part of the official political establishment, having no principled differences with either of the major parties.

The sole independent MP, Craig Ingram, lost his seat of Gippsland East to the National Party. In 1999, Ingram played a key role in assisting Labor to scrape over the line, defeat the hated Kennett Liberal government and form a minority government, which Ingram and two other rural independents supported. Last Saturday, no independent won a seat, while the Greens received just 10.6 percent of the primary vote, only marginally above their result at the last, 2006 state election, and 2 percent lower than their Victorian vote in the federal election just three months ago. Despite spending unprecedented sums on political advertising, in the expectation that they would win up to four lower house seats from Labor, they failed to win any.

Most of the 13 seats lost by the Brumby government to the Liberals were in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. Typically described in the press as the "sand belt", the area features many working and middle class families with large mortgages, but average incomes. Among the seats with the largest anti-Labor swings were Bentleigh (7.1 percent), Burwood (9.9 percent), Mount Waverly (8.3 percent), and Prahran (8.9 percent). Public transport, the hospital system crisis, and cost of living increases driven by rising interest rates and skyrocketing utility bills were among the issues that became the focus of anger towards the government's record.

Labor also suffered large losses in its "safe" seats in Melbourne's industrial centres. In the north, there was a 10.7 percent swing against Brumby in Broadmeadows, 10.8 percent against planning minister Justin Madden in Essendon, and 10.1 percent in Thomastown against incoming Labor MP Bronwyn Halfpenny, daughter of the former Stalinist trade union bureaucrat, John Halfpenny. In the west, there was a 12.3 percent swing in Williamstown, 8.1 percent in Footscray, 8.1 percent in Altona, and 9.4 percent in Derrimut—all major working class centres.

The campaigns of the various petty bourgeois ex-left groups that contested the election were barely distinguishable from that of the Greens. They all directed their preferences to the Greens

and then to the Labor Party, backing the re-election of the Brumby government against the Liberals. The Socialist Party's Stephen Jolly, a long standing member of the local council, received 9.6 percent in the inner Melbourne seat of Richmond, an increase of 3.9 percent from his vote in 2006. Jolly's campaign was assisted by sections of the trade union bureaucracy, which donated about \$50,000—reflecting the Socialist Party's political function as an apologist and prop for these politically bankrupt organisations, and for the political establishment more broadly. With about 70 percent of the vote counted, the Socialist Alliance won just over 1 percent in the four seats it contested. Given its preoccupation with elections and parliamentary influence, the result will only intensify the outfit's already deep crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party's candidate in Broadmeadows, Peter Byrne, received a significant 2.35 percent of the vote, despite the SEP not being listed on the ballot paper, due to antidemocratic electoral registration laws. The vote was nearly double the 1.3 percent vote Byrne won in the federal election last August, in the much larger seat of Calwell, which also covers Broadmeadows, and was also up from the 1.5 percent vote the SEP received in the 2006 state election.

In the course of the four-week 2010 campaign, the SEP distributed nearly 15,000 copies of its election statement, "Support the socialist alternative in the Victorian state election". Party members and supporters actively campaigned outside shopping centres, factories and other workplaces, schools and TAFE's, and held three public meetings in the electorate—the only political party to hold any meetings in the electorate throughout the entire campaign.

Taken as a whole, the Victorian election is yet another expression of the political shift underway within the working class and the widespread dissatisfaction and hostility to the parties of the political establishment. It raises before all class conscious workers and young people the urgent need for a genuine—socialist and internationalist—alternative. The SEP calls on all those who voted for our candidate, who supported our campaign and who agree with our socialist and internationalist program to become regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, study our history and perspectives, and apply to join the party.



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