

Australia: Victorian opposition directs preferences to government, almost ensuring a Labor victory

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The opposition Liberal Party in Victoria announced on Sunday night that it would direct its preferences to the governing Labor Party ahead of the Greens in the November 27 state poll. The extraordinary decision ensures that as many as six inner Melbourne seats that Labor risked losing to the Greens will almost certainly be retained by the government, meaning it will likely win another term in office.

Unnamed Liberal Party sources today told the *Australian* that the preferences decision was “suicidal”. To win government, the opposition will now require an anti-Labor swing of 6.5 percent, and a large number of outer suburban and regional seats to change from Labor to Liberal. This outcome cannot be ruled out, given widespread hostility towards the government of Premier John Brumby and the absence of any genuine left-wing outlet within the electoral apparatus—but it remains highly unlikely. Commentators had concluded that the Liberal Party’s most realistic chance of ousting Labor was to preference the Greens in the inner seats, aiming for a hung parliament in which neither major party would have a majority.

Opposition leader Ted Baillieu appeared grim faced when announcing that instead, Labor would be preferred over the Greens. He described the move as a “party decision”. Throughout the campaign, and in the televised leaders’ debate, Baillieu had refused to indicate whether the Liberals would preference Labor or the Greens, but left the clear impression he favoured backing the Greens in order to maximise his chances of becoming premier.

The apparent overruling of the opposition leader by his own party marks the culmination of a determined campaign by key sections of big business and the media, above all the Murdoch press. Brumby’s Labor government has proven itself one of the most ruthless pro-business administrations in Australia, and leading figures in the corporate world are keen to see it re-elected for another four-year term. Above all, however, they did not want a hung parliament, with the formation of a minority government dependent on the Greens.

At the beginning of the official election campaign, Rupert Murdoch himself made a highly unusual intervention into Victorian politics, castigating the “bloody Greens” as a risk to the economy. Murdoch’s *Herald Sun* newspaper then mounted a frenetic campaign, issuing daily articles and commentaries insisting that the Liberals had to back Labor in the inner seats to shut out the Greens. Corporate lobby groups also swung into action, with the Master Builders Association reportedly among those urging the Liberal Party to preference Labor.

This campaign immediately found reflection within the opposition. Several state Liberal MPs, including upper house member Helen Kroger, as well as national figures such as former Prime Minister John Howard, publicly opposed Baillieu’s prevarications and demanded that the Greens be rebuffed. As the infighting worsened, threatening to derail the opposition’s entire campaign, Liberal Party chiefs banned MPs and candidates from speaking on the issue.

The final preference decision underscores the fact that the major parties are, in the final analysis, nothing but vehicles for the implementation of the diktats of big business and finance capital. These forces concluded that it was unacceptable for the Liberal Party to risk a hung parliament with the Greens holding the balance of power—and the Liberals dutifully complied, even when they knew that by doing so they would most likely spend another four years on the opposition benches.

Former Victorian Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett, who led those within opposition ranks arguing for a preference deal with the Greens, declared: “By making this decision, [Baillieu] has said it is better for Victorians to have a stable government than to have a government that is in the hands of a minority group. He has put Victoria’s short- and long-term interests above his own political interests.”

The Greens pose no threat to the political establishment. The party is a bourgeois organisation, committed to the profit

system and the parliamentary apparatus that serves it. The Greens' campaign has been centred on preparations to enter coalition government with either Labor or Liberal, and their leading MPs have stressed that such a decision would be determined, above all, by which of the major parties offers the most political "stability". Senior state Greens' figures have insisted that the Greens are not a left-wing party—despite their increased standing in the polls (between 14 and 19 percent) being largely due to a definite shift to the left in the population, especially among young people.

Decisive layers within the ruling elite have nevertheless concluded that a hung parliament with the Greens holding the balance of power would prove a dangerous diversion, complicating the implementation of their pro-business "reform" agenda after the November 27 election.

Throughout the world governments are imposing savage austerity measures aimed at making the working class bear the burden of the global financial and economic crisis. Countries such as Greece, Ireland, and Britain are at the forefront of what is being prepared in every advanced capitalist country—major public spending cuts, including to health and education, pensions, and public sector jobs and wages. Australia is no exception. The treasury and finance departments have, along with the media, issued their instructions to the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard to begin imposing deep cuts. At the state level, Labor governments are already proceeding, with thousands of public service jobs destroyed in South Australia and cuts to health and education spending being prepared in Tasmania.

The Brumby government is readying similar measures in Victoria, despite remaining completely silent about this agenda in the course of the official election campaign.

Business and media circles are well aware that there is no public support for austerity measures and that the next government will have to proceed in defiance of majority opinion, and, increasingly, in defiance of mass social struggles. The state Labor government has already demonstrated its willingness to utilise repressive measures in such circumstances, having called out riot police against pickets, most recently in last year's West Gate Bridge construction workers' dispute over jobs and wages.

In the event of a hung parliament, and the Greens becoming Labor's junior coalition partner, the two parties will collaborate in implementing the demanded cuts. One only has to look at the record of the Greens in Tasmania, where they backed the savage measures imposed both by the Labor-Greens Accord government of 1989-1992 and the Greens-backed Liberal government if 1996-1998.

The Greens represent a somewhat different constituency within the bourgeoisie and among more affluent layers of the middle class than is represented by the two major parties—one more concerned with lifestyle and social issues, such as gay marriage, euthanasia and the environment. These are regarded by Rupert Murdoch and co., however, as an intolerable distraction from the real task at hand.

The media have hailed the Liberal Party decision to preference Labor over the Greens. The Fairfax media's *Age* editorial today, "Preferences decision unfair? No, just politics," declared: "The Liberals owe the Greens nothing, and are under no obligation to help them win enough seats to force a minority Labor government to rely on Greens support for survival... Far from rushing into the arms of the Brumby Labor government, Liberal leader Ted Baillieu and his colleagues have effectively declared: 'If you want a change of government, vote for us'."

Murdoch's *Herald Sun*'s editorial, titled "Baillieu takes a brave stand", enthused: "Although the decision on preferences is likely to help Labor retain key seats, Mr Baillieu has preferred to support stability in government.... The possibility of a hung parliament has receded along with any chance that the coalition will do any deal similar to the alliance that has caused a policy paralysis in the Gillard government in Canberra."

Click here for the coverage of the SEP Victorian election campaign.

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