Australia: Labor loses office in the Northern Territory

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has lost office in the Northern Territory, following last Saturday's election. Votes are still being counted, but Labor has suffered an overall 6.6 percent swing against it compared to the last election held in 2008. It is expected to win 9 of the Legislative Assembly's 25 seats, down from 12, while the Country Liberal Party will likely form government with 15 seats.

The result is another blow to the crisis-stricken Labor Party. In 2007, after the federal Howard government lost office, Labor held majorities in all nine federal, state, and territory parliaments. Since then, widespread disgust with its right-wing, pro-business agenda has led to major election defeats in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and Victoria. Labor depends on the Greens to hold on to office federally as well as in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. South Australia is the only parliament in which the Labor Party enjoys a majority of seats.

The ALP had governed the Northern Territory since 2001. It suffered large losses in the previous election four years ago, only clinging to power with a one-seat majority, but has now been thrown out of office largely due to a large anti-Labor shift in remote electorates. The northern rural seat of Arnhem, whose population is 80 percent Aboriginal, had a 29 percent swing against Labor. In Arafura and Stuart, also majority Aboriginal electorates, votes are still being counted, but there has been a 15 percent anti-Labor swing in each.

Each of these seats had been regarded as safe ALP seats. Various pundits had predicted the election would be determined in the urban seats of the Territory's capital, Darwin.

The voting shift in Aboriginal communities reflects bitter hostility towards Labor. In collaboration with the federal Labor government since 2007, the Territory Labor government enacted a series of right-wing, repressive measures that worsened the Third World type social conditions endured by many Aborigines. Indigenous people in the Northern Territory continue to suffer preventable diseases that have been eradicated in many parts of the world and have appalling rates of drug and alcohol addiction. Aboriginal men have an average life expectancy of just 58. Aborigines comprise 31 percent of the Territory's population but 84 percent of the prison population. Many indigenous people lack access to basic social services and infrastructure, including housing and health services.

The federal government's "intervention" into the Northern Territory Aboriginal communities—launched by the previous Howard government and extended under the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments—has only exacerbated the situation. With the involvement of the NT Labor administration, draconian policing measures have been stepped up, welfare recipients have had their payments "quarantined" for use only on selected items, and alcohol bans have been imposed. None of these measures has addressed the underlying causes of Aboriginal poverty, and the vindictive and stigmatising approach has produced widespread resentment in outlying Aboriginal communities.

Anger was also directed towards the NT government for its amalgamation in late 2008 of more than 60 community government councils into eleven "super-shires", which centralised administrative decision making and service delivery with adverse effects for local communities. The reorganisation was part of Labor's extension of the "intervention".

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After Saturday's election, Country Liberal Party leader Terry Mills acknowledged that he benefited from anti-intervention sentiment. He claimed that while the Liberal Party had launched the intervention and agreed with its continuation, Labor had made it a "bureaucratic exercise" that was "absorbed in itself, very expensive and really just added to the cynicism and the grief of the bush".

The media, however, stridently denied that the intervention played any role whatsoever in the election outcome.

Murdoch's *Australian* was especially adamant that the result instead represented a shift to the right among Aboriginal people. "More than a decade of progressive policies have been rejected by Australia's first people, with Aborigines taking the lead in sweeping the Northern Territory Labor government from office to take control for themselves," its lead article on the election yesterday declared. It continued: "The radical change in approach to indigenous affairs seeks to reinvigorate the traditional structures of Aboriginal authority, and attempt to combat welfare dependency and paternalism by putting responsibility back on the shoulders of individuals."

The election result is being cynically utilised to bolster the long-running campaign to abolish the provision of any welfare services to Aboriginal people, as the first step towards targeting the working class as a whole. The Northern Territory intervention has already been used to advance a series of anti-welfare precedents, including welfare quarantining that is now being extended nationally. This is now set to be stepped up even further, in line with the growing chorus from within corporate circles that federal and state governments must match the measures introduced in Europe and the US since the 2008 financial crash in gutting public spending programs.

In the Northern Territory, as in parts of Western Australia and Queensland, the financial press is bluntly demanding that Aborigines be dragooned into the mining industry. Anyone not willing or able to work in the mines or mining-related industries will be left to fend for themselves.

Most Aborigines who voted CLP did so as a protest against the regressive policies of the Labor Party. But the result did represent a shift to the right by a layer of Aboriginal politicians, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats who had previously been aligned with the Labor Party. These elements have been incessantly promoted in the Murdoch and financial press for their embrace of the pro-business, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" line.

The Country Liberal Party (CLP) reaped the benefits. Alison Anderson, a former Labor minister who defected in 2009, won her seat as a CLP member. Francis Maralampuwi Xavier, who formerly sought preselection as a Labor election candidate, may have won the seat of Arafura, and Bess Price, championed by right-wing commentators such as Andrew Bolt, is in the lead with votes still being counted for Stuart.

The new NT government is set to slash public spending to achieve its pledge of eliminating the budget deficit. Labor accused the CLP of preparing to sack 10 percent of all public sector workers, but new chief minister Terry Mills has ruled out such cuts. Mills is already under pressure to clarify what spending programs he will eliminate or cut with the *Australian Financial Review* describing his election campaign as "lacklustre and confusing" for failing to do so.

In Aboriginal areas, the government has pledged a raft of regressive measures, including tying public funding of services for remote outstations to "education and employment outcomes", facilitating the privatisation of remote state schools, and cutting public housing spending. At the same time there will be a significant increase of spending for police and prisons, following a "law-and-order" bidding war between Labor and the CLP during the election campaign.

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