Australia: Victorian state government facing electoral defeat

Patrick Kelly
10 November 2014

The Liberal government in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, faces likely defeat at the November 29 election.

This would mark the first one-term government in the state since 1955, underscoring the unprecedented instability of the parliamentary system at every level of government. Amid a deepening economic and social crisis in Victoria, Premier Denis Napthine's right-wing, pro-business government is despised in the working class. The opposition Labor Party is cynically attempting to capitalise on this sentiment, while preparing to ruthlessly enforce the demands of big business and finance capital if returned to office.

Labor lost power four years ago, having previously been in government between 1999 and 2010. The last election result came as a surprise to business lobby groups and major media outlets, all of which campaigned to reinstall Labor. In Victoria, Labor was at the forefront of a national drive to privatise the healthcare and education systems, as well as undermining other basic services, including transport and public housing, while slashing corporate taxes.

Since 2010, the corporate elite has demanded that the Liberal Party government deepen its predecessor's pro-business agenda and implement austerity measures against the working class. The elected premier, Ted Baillieu, was removed from office in March 2013 after failing to entirely satisfy these demands. The *Age* last month reported that 12 months before the leadership change, businesswoman Elizabeth Proust, "warned of [corporate] boardroom discussions about the lack of government action to address Victoria's economic problems."

Since Napthine's installation 18 months ago, the government has implemented sharper austerity measures and sought to rush through business-oriented transport and other infrastructure.

Napthine, with only the slimmest of parliamentary majorities, has received crucial support from both the Labor Party and the Greens. Former Liberal parliamentarian turned independent Geoff Shaw threatened to bring down the government by passing a no-confidence motion, but the Labor Party refused to support it. Opposition leader Daniel Andrews instead kept the government in office and facilitated its agenda by voting for its budget appropriation bills. The Greens, with three upper house parliamentarians, likewise voted for the budget bills, with party leader Greg Barber publicly declaring that he "gave credit" to the government for delivering "truly massive surpluses."

The all-parliamentary consensus for austerity underscores the bogus character of the election. The official campaign of the major parties and a plethora of minor parties and so-called independents has been based on the narrowest and most parochial matters. None of the real issues confronting working people—war and the promotion of militarism, rising economic hardship and social inequality, and the destruction of democratic rights—are being acknowledged, let alone debated.

The Victorian government, with Labor's full backing, is part of the unprecedented multi-million dollar, four-year "celebration" of Australian participation of World War I at the state and federal level. This glorification of militarism seeks to condition workers and youth for new wars as the Abbott government integrates Australia ever more closely into US provocations against Russia and China, and its new military intervention in the Middle East.

Napthine's campaign centres on promoting the government's plan to invest $27 billion in new urban rail lines and expanded toll roads, developed through Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). He is also running another antidemocratic "law and order" campaign, including giving police new powers to secretly search people's

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homes and collect DNA data from children.

Labor is appealing to popular opposition to the budget cuts, while at the same time preparing to extend austerity measures. Labor's cynical and empty promises were on display last week when party leader Daniel Andrews staged a photo opportunity to announce new education funding. While Victoria's vehicle number plates would feature the slogan, "The Education State," the new promised funding is for just 11 new schools. Research released last month by the Grattan Institute think tank showed that the state's population growth meant that another 550 schools would be required within 20 years.

Behind closed doors, Andrews is continuing to court big business. The founder of Melbourne's Crown Casino, Lloyd Williams, was overheard last week telling the Labor leader that James Packer, Crown's owner and Australia's third wealthiest individual, would "kick every goal he can for you" in the campaign. Packer denied that he was backing Labor, although Andrews admitted that he and Packer had become friends during his time as minister for gaming under the previous Labor government.

A profile on Andrews published in the *Australian Financial Review* last month noted that his pledge to privatise the $7 billion Port of Melbourne was "lauded by business." The Labor leader told the newspaper that with the policy he hoped to "send the message … that this was a modern Labor Party." He added that he admired the "youthful energy" of the New South Wales Liberal government, and declared that people on Collins Street, Melbourne's corporate and financial hub, "cross the street" to complain to him that Napthine is "inaccessible to business."

On the pretext of creating 100,000 jobs, Labor has pledged to create a panel of corporate executives to determine how to allocate more than $500 million in public funds to different sections of business.

This target is another miserable fraud. Victoria has long been the centre of Australian manufacturing, and the savage restructuring of the sector since the 2008 global financial crisis has decimated jobs throughout the state. The threatened destruction of the car industry, including the GM, Ford and Toyota assembly makers, is only the most prominent of a swathe of shut downs and mass layoffs, all enforced by the trade unions.

Unemployment is the highest of any mainland state, with the official jobless rate at 6.8 percent. The real situation is far worse, with many unemployed dropping out of the jobs market in despair or managing to qualify for other disability or pension entitlements.

Joblessness and economic hardship is fuelling a social crisis in working class communities that is completely ignored in the official campaign. A Victorian Council of Social Service report last month that found 1.07 million people in the state are living near or below the poverty line. The ultra-wealthy, on the other hand, are accumulating ever-greater personal fortunes. Melbourne is a significant regional centre for finance capital. A survey conducted last July by the global real estate consultancy firm Knight Frank found that ultra-high net worth individuals—those with assets valued at more than $30 million—ranked Melbourne number one among world cities, just ahead of Frankfurt, for "quality of life."

The Greens aim to increase their numbers in the parliamentary upper house, and win one or two lower house seats for the first time. The Greens have previously stated their willingness to form a coalition government with either Labor or Liberal in the event of a hung parliament. Their campaign has centred on opposing the government's proposed East-West Link toll road. This is an appeal to lifestyle concerns within the Greens' core upper-middle class constituency in Melbourne's inner suburbs, amid fears of increased traffic and reduced park areas.

The various middle class pseudo-left forces are also basing their campaigns on this issue. The misnamed Socialist Party previously declared it would contest the seat of Richmond, and "run on our record of activism in the area and use the campaign to put the issue of the disastrous East-West tunnel right up on the political agenda."

Regardless of whether Labor or Liberal is in office, the next Victorian government will march in lockstep with the federal government's incorporation into US imperialism's war plans and provocations, as it steps up the assault on the living conditions and democratic rights of the working class.

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