

Australia: Liberal-National Coalition loses Victorian state election

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The Liberal-National Coalition government in Victoria was thrown out of office in Saturday's state election, becoming the first government to be ousted after just one term of office in that state since 1955.

The result in Australia's second most populous state intensifies the crisis confronting the federal Coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Bitter hostility in the working class toward Canberra's May budget and its cuts to education, health, welfare and other basic services intersected with similar opposition to Victorian Premier Denis Napthine's own austerity measures.

In Victoria, the Labor Party now takes office on the basis of a cynical, two-faced campaign. On the one hand, it assured big business that it would ruthlessly advance its interests, as it did when previously in office between 1999 and 2010, while on the other hand it publicly denounced Abbott and Napthine's spending cuts and appealed to the widespread concern over rising unemployment levels and the deterioration in essential services.

The election outcome is further evidence of the systemic impasse facing the Abbott government and the entire parliamentary setup across the country. There is unanimous agreement within ruling circles that the "international competitiveness" of Australian capitalism can be maintained only by driving down workers' wages and living standards, and slashing spending on health, education and other basic services for working people. Governments that begin to implement this agenda, however, are immediately threatened with ignominious defeat at the ballot box.

In today's *Australian Financial Review*, Laura Tingle, the newspaper's political editor, commented: "Tony Abbott and his colleagues came to office presuming they would have a minimum of two terms to

implement any tough reforms ... simply because no federal government in living memory has got less than two terms in office. Victorians' decision to turf out the Coalition after just one term has changed all that."

Only 60 percent of the vote has so far been counted, reflecting the large number of pre-poll votes cast ahead of Saturday's ballot. The Labor Party received just 38.8 percent of the primary vote, up a bare 2.5 percent from the 2010 state election, while the Coalition won 41.8 percent, down 3 percent.

The previous Napthine government only had the narrowest of parliamentary majorities, so these "swings" will likely see Labor win 48 seats in the parliamentary lower house, against 39 for the Liberal-National coalition.

Despite the widespread hostility toward Abbott's administration, Labor will form government in Victoria with one of the lowest incoming votes in history—for example, well below the 43.7 percent that Labor polled when it lost office in 1992.

In another expression of discontent, "informal" voting (people ruining their ballot papers or leaving them blank) rose marginally to exceed 5 percent. It is not yet known whether the proportion of voters failing to cast a ballot at all will rise above the 8 percent mark set in 2010.

The anti-Coalition swing did not produce any increased vote for the Greens. They received 11 percent, the same as in 2010. However, their vote was higher in inner-city electorates and they won Melbourne, their first lower house seat in the state parliament, with 41 percent of the primary vote. The Greens consolidated their core constituency among high income, professional inner-city residents, while also benefiting from the hostility of students and young people more generally to the two major parties.

The Greens immediately sought to demonstrate their commitment to “parliamentary stability” on behalf of the ruling elite. Newly elected Melbourne parliamentarian Ellen Sandell declared on Saturday: “People want Labor and the Greens to work together and that’s what we’ve been saying all along.” Party leader Greg Barber said: “It’s clear the government will need the Greens’ support. We will negotiate with both parties.” He added: “We said we want to support the Labor Party in government.”

Barber was referring, in the most immediate sense, to the fact that Labor will probably hold only 13 of the 40 seats in the state’s upper house, which can block legislation. With votes still being counted, the opposition Coalition is likely to have 16, and the Greens 5, with the remaining 6 seats shared among an array of minor parties, including the Shooters and Fishers Party.

Such is the underlying disaffection with all the major parties that are in the upper house, Labor’s vote was just 33.7 percent, the Coalition’s 36.5 percent and the Greens about 10 percent. The remaining 20 percent went to a wide range of other formations, none of which gained more than 3 percent of the vote. While this alienation remains very diffuse and unfocussed, it has produced another extremely unstable parliamentary situation, similar to that confronting the Abbott government, which also lacks a majority in the fractured federal Senate.

In working class areas around Melbourne, the state capital, Labor’s vote rose only marginally from 2010, as in Broadmeadows, Thomastown and Werribee, and in some cases it fell, as in Dandenong and Footscray. Labor primarily benefited from intensive campaigning in selected “marginal” seats. The trade union bureaucracy organised to door knock homes in six seats—Frankston, Bentleigh, Mordialloc, Carrum, Monbulk and Bellarine—seeking to capitalise on widespread hostility to cuts to health care, ambulance services, firefighters, public transport, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), schools and universities.

Negative images depicting Abbott and his government’s budget cuts featured prominently in Labor’s advertising during the final stages of the campaign, and in its election-day material outside the polling booths on Saturday. Following the defeat, leading Liberals referred to the hostility toward the

Abbott government’s May budget, many of whose key features remain stalled in the Senate. Former federal treasurer Peter Costello said the “federal budget was clearly toxic in Victoria” and warned “you can have one-term governments” and it can happen “federally as much as the state.”

It will not take long for the hollow fraud of Labor’s state election campaign to emerge. The Labor Party has come to office on the basis of an anti-austerity vote, feigning concern over rising unemployment, while being wholly committed to exactly the same right-wing, “free market” policies as the former Liberal government.

Premier-elect Daniel Andrews pledged to recall parliament to pass a so-called Back to Work Act, essentially public subsidies for businesses that hire unemployed workers. Andrews has promised to create 100,000 jobs in two years. In reality, the deepening global economic crisis and slowing growth in Australia will unleash further mass layoffs in working class areas across Victoria, starting with the complete shutdown of the auto assembly industry over the next two years.

None of the real issues confronting the working class was raised in the election campaign. A focus on the most narrowly parochial issues in different electorates was deliberately used by the political and media establishment to exclude any discussion of the worsening global economic situation, the bipartisan assault on fundamental democratic rights, and the promotion of militarism and drive to war by the US, Australian and allied imperialist powers.



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