

Ruling party wiped out in Australia's Northern Territory election

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Last Saturday's election in the Northern Territory (NT) underscored Australia's political instability and the decay of the two-party parliamentary order. The territory's Country Liberal Party (CLP), which is part of the federal Liberal-National Coalition, lost office in a landslide that could reduce it to one seat in the territory's 25-member single-house Legislative Assembly.

The defeat came just three days before Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Coalition government convened a new federal parliament today, having barely survived the July 2 double dissolution election. Four months on from when parliament last sat, the federal government faces greater political obstacles, now compounded by the NT result.

After winning the previous NT election in 2012 by an almost similar margin, the CLP's vote fell to its lowest ever, about 32 percent, illustrating the volatility produced by the disintegration of the support bases for both the CLP and the Labor Party. The result was the first defeat of a first-term government since the NT was granted elected parliamentary rule in 1974.

The CLP, which held office continuously for 27 years, from 1974 to 2001, and from 2012 to now, has been decimated. It is likely to be outnumbered in the assembly by three or more independents, who may be designated the official opposition. Even a wipeout in 2005, when the CLP gained just 37.5 percent of the vote, left it with four seats.

While Labor will take office, holding as many as 15 seats (votes are still being counted), its victory was another negative one. It was a vote of disgust and opposition to the government and the prevailing pro-business program, rather than any enthusiasm for the Labor Party.

Despite a swing of almost 19 percentage points

against the CLP, Labor's vote only crept up by 6.4 percent from a 2012 low of 35.6 percent. A record 21 percent of voters opted for independents or other parties, including the Greens, whose vote fell by 0.5 points to 2.7 percent. The independents mostly had split from the CLP or Labor since the last election, claiming to now be "outsiders."

Similar volatile results have been produced in other recent elections around Australia, with first-term governments ousted in the states of Victoria (2014) and Queensland (2015), and the same fate almost befalling Julia Gillard's federal Labor government in 2010 and Turnbull's Coalition government on July 2.

Although the NT has the smallest population—about 245,000—of the country's states and territories, the result is a barometer of broader trends wracking Australia's political establishment. The NT, with a substantial indigenous population, is an extreme example of the widening class gulf between the poorest layers of society and the wealthy elite, and of the implosion of Australia's mining boom, which once underpinned the territory's economy and government revenues.

For the past four years, NT politics has been marked by inner-party coups and counter-coups, and political defections, echoing instability in politics nationally. Chief Minister Adam Giles became the country's first indigenous head of government by toppling his CLP predecessor Terry Mills just seven months after the 2012 election. Giles, in turn, scarcely survived attempts from within the CLP to dump him. Six members of parliament left the CLP at one time or another, eventually stripping the government of its majority. Now Giles may have lost his own seat, depending on preference flows from other candidates.

Prime Minister Turnbull, who faces a constant threat

from Tony Abbott, whom he ousted as Liberal Party leader last September, tried to blame the NT defeat on “local issues,” while appealing to his colleagues to heed the need for “unity” in “politics on every level.” Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten also invoked the slogan “disunity is death” to explain the CLP’s disaster. Facing popular discontent, both Turnbull and Shorten are appealing for a bipartisan front to impose severe cuts to social spending, to which Labor committed itself during the federal election campaign to the tune of billions of dollars.

Rather than simply “local issues,” the NT results reveal, in an acute form, the fallout from the country’s economic reversal. Soon after it was elected in 2012, the CLP government hiked up utility prices, hitting working-class households, and unveiled a fire sale of public assets in a bid to shore up revenues. Among the privatisations was Darwin’s civilian port, which was leased last year to a Chinese company, triggering objections from the Obama administration.

Between 2005 and 2011, mining was the biggest contributor to the NT’s output, before being eclipsed by the construction of a \$40 billion Inpex LNG plant in Darwin harbour. Since then, thousands of jobs have been destroyed by the closure of three iron ore mines and one manganese mine, plus the Gove bauxite refinery, where 1,000 workers lost their livelihoods in one hit.

When the Inpex plant was given the go-ahead in 2012, Labor’s then Chief Minister Paul Henderson described it as a “game changer” that would “underpin our economy for the next 40 to 50 years.” That proved a myth. Economic forecasters are warning that the NT faces a “huge construction cliff” now that the plant’s construction nears completion. In 2014–15, about 2 percent of the NT’s population left, mostly because of the lack of work. Empty apartments today dot the inner-city skyline of Darwin, the territory’s capital.

While mining, construction and property development companies made super-profits, working and social conditions deteriorated, especially for indigenous people, the most oppressed layer of the working class. Eleven years on from the 2007 NT Intervention—a police-military operation and welfare-cutting regime directed against indigenous settlements—health, education, housing and other basic services have been slashed.

This class divide was illustrated by “Heartcent Maps” report indicating that rates of heart disease are five times higher in rural NT than in Australia’s most affluent suburbs. The repressive response of NT governments to the immense social problems being created was exposed last month by television footage of Aboriginal boys as young as 10 being assaulted, stripped naked, tear-gassed, held in solitary confinement, and shackled in “restraint chairs” inside Darwin’s Don Dale juvenile detention centre.

Labor’s victory will only see these conditions worsen. Michael Gunner, Labor’s chief minister-elect, called for a “briefing” on the youth centre abuses, claiming he needed more information, even though the cases are well documented and began under the previous Labor government, in which he served. He said there would be no funding to replace the Don Dale facility until 2019–20.

Gunner also reassured business leaders that his government would avoid “affecting or interrupting the delicate business situation we have in the Northern Territory.” In other words, Labor’s agenda will be determined by the dictates of the corporate elite, just like the CLP’s.



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