

Australia: Liberals cling to office in Tasmanian election

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A Liberal Party government in the Australian island state of Tasmania was returned to office with a reduced vote in last Saturday's election, and is likely to hold a precarious one-seat majority in the 25-member legislative chamber.

The corporate media hailed the result as an "historic" victory. It is the first time that a Liberal administration has been returned for a second four-year term since 1986. Hopes were even expressed that the outcome in Australia's smallest state could stabilise the national parliamentary order and buoy the unravelling federal Liberal-National Coalition government.

"After the political madness that has beset Australia over the past two years, the Liberal victory in the Tasmanian election could be a sign of a return to normality," today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial claimed.

In reality, the Liberals scraped back into office largely as a result of another negative vote against Labor and the Greens. These two parties remain widely detested and discredited after imposing the corporate austerity agenda when in power from 2010 to 2014. During that period, the Greens also propped up the federal Labor government of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd before it was defeated in a landslide.

More broadly, the vote reflects deepening disaffection with the parliamentary establishment as a whole. No party could legitimately claim to have popular support. The discontent in the working class produced by years of the destruction of permanent jobs and decimation of basic services found no political outlet.

Premier Will Hodgman's Liberal government suffered a negative swing of about 1.5 percentage points. Labor picked up a swing of almost 6 percent, but from a record low vote in 2014 of just 27 percent. The result was the still one of the worst in the party's

history.

For the Greens, who posture as a progressive "third party," the outcome was disastrous. They suffered a swing of about 3 percent, having already lost a third of their vote in 2014. The result—just 10 percent of the vote—is the worst in Tasmania since the Greens were first formed as "Green independents" in 1989. Tasmania is regarded as the "home" of the Greens, which later spread to other states as support for Labor and the Coalition collapsed.

The right-wing populist Jacqui Lambie Network, which sought to exploit the hostility toward the political establishment, fared even worse. Led by ex-federal senator, Jacqui Lambie, the media suggested the party could possibly pick up enough seats to enter government. Instead, it secured just 3 percent of the votes and failed to win a single seat.

With voting being compulsory, another expression of the political alienation was the informal vote—those who cast a vote for no candidate or spoiled their ballot. In the northern and central electorates of Bass, Braddon and Lyons, where levels of poverty are highest, the informal vote was around 5 percent. In the generally more affluent southern electorates of Denison and Franklin that figure was about 2.5 percent.

Because of the complex flows of preference votes in the state's Hare-Clark proportional representation system, it may be many days before the seat count is finalised. The Liberals may hold 13 or 14 seats out of 25. A 13-seat outcome could produce instability because the government must appoint one MP as the assembly speaker, leaving it without a working majority. Labor could have 9 to 10 seats, a gain of two or three, and the Greens may be reduced to just one seat, down from three.

Hodgman, a third generation Liberal politician, heads

an openly big business government. That includes the predatory gambling industry, which poured millions of dollars into a media and advertising scare campaign, threatening the destruction of thousands of jobs in hotels and clubs if poker machines were restricted to casinos, as promised by Labor and the Greens.

Apart from the poker machine issue, however, the Labor and Greens campaigns were virtually indistinguishable from the Liberals, who matched their phony promises to increase spending on the chronically over-stretched public health and education systems. There was no mention whatsoever of the crucial issues confronting the working class: falling wages and living standards, soaring social inequality and the looming dangers of trade war and war.

Moreover, Labor and the Greens had little credibility after slashing spending, and closing schools, from 2010 to 2014. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Labor-Greens government destroyed 1,000 public sector jobs. The overall population of the island is just over half a million.

Labor attempted unsuccessfully to don a fresh face by installing Rebecca White as a new leader just a year ago. However, White is a career Labor staff member who represented the party in parliament throughout the 2010–14 Labor-Greens coalition.

Likewise, Greens leader Cassy O'Connor was a key minister in the Labor-Greens government. She served in the cabinet alongside Nick McKim, now a federal Greens senator. As education minister, he provoked intense public opposition by moving to shut down public schools to satisfy the demands of the financial markets for deep budget cuts.

Party founder and long-time national leader, former Senator Bob Brown, yesterday publicly offered to lead a review into the Greens' devastating performance. Yet he is the architect of the Greens' evolution from an environmental protest outfit into the "third party" of the capitalist political elite. He led the Greens into their first de facto coalition with a state Labor government from 1989 to 1992 and later backed a similar arrangement to prop up a minority Liberal government from 1996 to 1998.

Significantly, the Greens' vote was much higher—around 17 percent—in Denison, based on the state capital of Hobart. This likely reflects the party's increasing reliance on an upper middle class

constituency in better-off suburbs.

Whatever the outcome of any review by the Greens, O'Connor has already indicated a further shift in a right-wing, nationalist direction. On election night she said the party would move for an investigation into "foreign ownership and influence" in Tasmania when parliament resumed. This dovetails with the campaign being mounted by the federal Coalition government against "Chinese interference" in Australia, accompanied by anti-democratic legislation aimed at suppressing anti-war and other dissent.

O'Connor also extended an olive branch to the Liberal government, signalling the Greens' readiness to help it function with a narrow majority. She congratulated Hodgman, saying: "I do wish you well, and I do hope that over the next four years you put this island and its people first."

The failure of Jacqui Lambie's "network" to profit from the widespread political disenchantment provides another demonstration of the unstable character of such outfits. Lambie first won a seat in the federal Senate in 2013 as a member of mining magnate Clive Palmer's party, which has since collapsed.

Lambie, an ex-military police officer, promotes xenophobic, bigoted and authoritarian responses as a means of diverting the discontent over job losses, falling living standards and budget cuts. Having broken with Palmer on an opportunist basis, without any clear political differences, her grouping was itself hit by defections and ructions.



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