

Australia: Victorian Labor government promotes bogus community contest

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Ahead of a state election in Victoria on November 24, the Labor government has announced a series of community projects that have been awarded a total of just \$30 million. Project proposals were first pitted against one another, with the “winners” and “losers” determined via an online ballot.

The government’s “Pick My Project” initiative was a cynical stunt from start to finish. In April, Premier Daniel Andrews announced a “new grassroots democracy program” that would involve community groups, schools, local councils, and other organisations submitting proposed projects, costing between \$20,000 and \$200,000. These, the government explained, “could include anything from sporting and recreation infrastructure, community arts projects, improvements to community facilities or the local environment.”

Between July and September, residents of Victoria aged 16 and over could create an account on the Pick My Project website and cast three votes for projects in their local area. More than 2,000 proposed projects were submitted and pitted against one another. Nearly 90 percent were denied public funding, with the 237 “winning” projects split between metropolitan areas (120 projects) and rural and regional areas (117 projects).

Government claims that the process represented an exercise in “grassroots democracy” that gave “power to local communities to decide on the projects that are right for them” are a fraud. Just 95,000 people participated in the online poll—constituting 1.5 percent of Victoria’s 6.3 million people.

The process was a public relations exercise, with local organisations and schools desperate for funding encouraged to direct people in their communities to the “Pick My Project” website. Labor social media websites cynically compared the process to voting in

the reality TV singing contest “Australian Idol.” Everything was timed to allow more ribbon-cutting opportunities for Labor parliamentarians desperately hustling for votes before November 24.

After four years in power, the state Labor government has presided over deteriorating working class living standards and escalating social inequality (see: “Victorian Labor government makes election pitch to big business”).

“Pick My Project” underscores the right-wing, anti-working class character of the government, which is backed by the trade unions and Greens. Enormous sums of money have been allocated for the government’s policy priorities. This includes \$2 billion to expand the police force by a record 20 percent, tens of billions on rail and road infrastructure primarily aimed at assisting big business by eliminating export bottlenecks, and another \$300 million in direct tax cuts for business.

Meanwhile, just one tenth of the latter sum, \$30 million, was allocated for community projects across the entire state. Among rejected funding proposals were:

- The Multicultural Youth Centre in the suburb of Broadmeadows, where the closure of the car industry has helped push the official unemployment rate over 25 percent, provides sporting facilities, legal advice, and drug and alcohol counselling services, especially oriented to Middle Eastern and Muslim refugees and immigrants. Its failed “Pick My Project” application for heating and air conditioning explained that the Centre “is too warm in summer and too cold in the winter because its walls and roof are constructed with metal cladding, therefore attendees tend not to stay.”

- Tarneit Rise Primary, a local public school in

Tarneit, a western suburb which is among Melbourne's outer areas that has significant numbers of youth of Sudanese and Somali origin who have been slandered by the political and media establishment as "African gangs." The school applied for a \$105,000 soccer and netball facility with an attached playground, which would be open to all young people in the area. The government website now explains: "This project did not receive enough votes to be successful."

- An application by a resident in the town of Morwell for the Student Youth radio network to receive \$46,000 in order to provide audio media courses for 15-25 year olds, to allow "their voice to be heard ... and provide alternatives to negative coping and recreation activities like alcohol and other drugs" was rejected. The town is in the Latrobe Valley industrial working class centre, which has been devastated by last year's closure of the Hazelwood power station and other major sackings. Young people have been badly affected—25 percent of 15-19 year olds are not in employment, education or training, and a methamphetamine epidemic has caused enormous hardship.

Many more examples could be provided of badly needed community projects and infrastructure developments in working class areas that the government denied funding. Other rejected initiatives included services for mental and physical health, the arts, recreation and sporting facilities, along with playgrounds and other facilities for children. Under the profit system, basic services and facilities that ought to be freely provided and made accessible to everyone are instead denied to those not wealthy enough to afford their private provision.

The Victorian Labor government's "Pick My Project" is a cynical electoral ploy that only entrenches these inequalities.



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