

Labor re-elected with increased majority in Australian state of Victoria

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The Victorian Labor government headed by Premier Daniel Andrews was re-elected on November 24 with an increased majority in the lower house and significant gains in the upper house. While state issues were in play, the outcome is a repudiation of the federal Liberal-National Party Coalition and its lurch, since ousting Malcolm Turnbull in August and installing Scott Morrison as prime minister, into ever more blatant anti-immigrant xenophobia and right-wing populism.

With counting is still to be finalised, Labor has won at least six seats from the opposition Liberal Party, and one that was held by the Greens. From just a one-seat majority, it may end up with as many as 55 of the 88 lower house seats. In the 40-seat upper house, Labor now has at least 19 seats and can horse-trade with several single issue minor parties to ensure the passage of its legislation.

State-wide, Labor's vote increased by close to 5 percent, while the Liberals' plunged by over 6 percent and the Greens by 1.6 percent. In middle-class electorates in the eastern and south-eastern suburbs of the state capital Melbourne, the swing to Labor was higher than the state average, enabling it to win the Liberal-held seats of Burwood, Ringwood, Box Hill, Mount Waverly and Bass. Labor also took a Liberal-held seat in the regional centre of Geelong and the Green-held inner Melbourne suburban seat of Northcote.

The Liberal-National coalition also faced significant challenges from self-styled "local" independents, in regional-rural electorates, with the National Party likely to lose the seats of Mildura and Morwell.

The Labor government went into the election with the clear support of the business establishment and favourable coverage from both television and print media. Since taking office in 2014, the party has cut

payroll tax and privatised key assets, such as the Port of Melbourne, while delivering a budget surplus by strangling investment into public health and education. It has committed up to \$48 billion to overcome glaring problems in Melbourne's road, rail and port systems to try and improve the city's attractiveness to transnational corporate investors. And it vowed to step-up this business-orientated agenda if it were returned to power.

The Liberal opposition, echoing the right-wing cabal that largely dictates the policy of the federal Morrison government, conducted a campaign centred on law-and-order hysteria over crime and terrorism, combined with attempts to blame immigration for the dysfunctional infrastructure in education, health and transport.

While Labor received massive financial support from both big business and the corporatist trade unions, the fact that the Liberal Party was not viewed as a viable alternative left the Liberals struggling to raise donations.

The Greens suffered a debacle. Their policies are virtually indistinguishable from those of the Labor Party and their campaign was rocked by media-driven allegations of misogyny and sexual misconduct against several of its candidates. The party lost four upper house members, with only one, state leader Samantha Ratnam, being re-elected, through preferences directed to her by the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists.

In the lower house, the Greens appear to have clung on to two seats in the affluent inner suburbs of Melbourne, but Labor's outright majority means it has no need to enter into any arrangements with them.

Across the state, the sordid preference swapping between a gaggle of right-wing and single-issue parties has resulted in the election, into the upper house, of up to four members of the Derryn Hinch's Justice Party, a

law-and-order outfit, two members of Transport Matters, and candidates of the Aussie Battler Party, the libertarian Liberal Democrats, Sustainable Australia and Animal Justice. The Victorian Socialists won 4.5 percent of the vote in the main region they contested—the Northern Metropolitan—but did not win a seat due to the vagaries of preference flows.

The outcome in Victoria has plunged the Liberal Party into bitter infighting nationally. Supporters of Turnbull wasted no time in blaming the result on his ousting and the nationalist demagoguery, religious-laced bigotry and climate change denial espoused by many of those who organised his removal, such as former Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

On election night, former Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett demanded, on national television, that the party's state president, Michael Kroger—who played a key role in the ousting of Turnbull and presided over the Victorian campaign—immediately resign.

Writing in the *Guardian* today, Oliver Yates, an executive of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, who described himself as a “fiscally conservative, socially progressive” Liberal, warned that he and likeminded people would split from the party if it “refused to reform itself.” It was “in a death spiral, being ill informed, out of touch and unable to attract new members,” he declared.

Federal Liberal member and Turnbull loyalist Tim Wilson, who holds a Melbourne-based seat, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “The party needs to modernise, it needs to focus on the issues that connect directly with voters, and it needs to be a party for the 21st century.”

The Morrison government, which must call a federal election on or before May 18, 2019, has predictably downplayed the national implications of the result. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg baldly asserted that state issues were solely to blame.

Labor spokesperson Richard Marles, however, immediately highlighted on the weekend that if anything close to the swing took place in the federal election, the government would lose at least six seats, and this was just in Victoria. Nationally, a 6 percent swing would result in the complete decimation of the Liberal Party and a landslide victory for Labor.

The Victorian result underscores that the ousting of Turnbull was not motivated by any calculation in the

Liberal Party that it would improve its prospects of holding onto government. Instead, the anti-Turnbull cabal, led by Abbott and backed by the Murdoch media, was well aware that the factional removal of the prime minister would most likely lead to a major election defeat.

Turnbull was nevertheless torn down. While he had functioned as one of the most loyal US allies, under both Obama and Trump, he was nevertheless viewed by the military-intelligence apparatus as insufficiently committed to Washington's militarist agenda against China. Among the key Liberal Party instigators of Turnbull's removal were former special forces' officer and head of the Senate intelligence committee Andrew Hastie, and former army general Jim Molan.

Turnbull was also considered an obstacle to the effort to shift the Coalition even further, in an ultra-right direction. Parallel with developments internationally, sections of the Australian ruling elite are consciously seeking to cultivate a nationalist, militarist and even fascistic constituency against the growing opposition to social inequality and the capitalist system within the working class and among youth.

Abbott and his wing, modelling themselves on the so-called “alt-right” in the US, which has taken control of much of the Republican Party and forms the base of the Trump administration, are seeking to refashion the Liberal Party along similar lines.

The defeat in Victoria has clearly triggered a vast intensification of the ferocious factional struggle that is threatening to tear apart one of the pillars of Australia's two-party political system. In the background, the other pillar, the Labor Party, is preparing to form government nationally, on behalf of the financial and corporate elite.



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