

Australian Labor Party vote falls further in by-election

Mike Head
6 July 2020

Despite the crisis of the ruling Liberal-National Coalition amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the vote for the opposition Australian Labor Party fell further last Saturday in a federal by-election.

With vote-counting still continuing, it appears that Labor will barely hold the semi-rural seat of Eden-Monaro by few hundred votes, having suffered a 3.2 percentage point loss in its primary vote, down to 35.9 percent. That was on top of a near-3 point fall in last year's federal election, when Labor's national vote dropped to a century low of 33 percent.

The biggest swings against Labor occurred in Queanbeyan, a largely working-class city neighbouring Canberra, the national capital. Labor's vote fell by up to 10 percent in polling stations across Queanbeyan, which is home to many service and trades workers employed in Canberra.

Labor's continued loss of votes among working people follows its further shift to the right to adopt even more explicit pro-business policies after last year's federal election debacle. Labor formed a de facto partnership with the Liberal-National government in last summer's bushfire catastrophe. That virtual coalition has continued throughout the economic breakdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the bushfire disaster, Labor leader Anthony Albanese repeatedly refused to criticise the government's indifferent response to the immense social suffering caused and its refusal to address the underlying global warming that helped fuel the unprecedented infernos. Then, as soon as the COVID-19 emergency struck, the federal, state and territory Labor leaders formed a wartime-like "national cabinet" with Prime Minister Scott Morrison to run the country.

Throughout the by-election campaign, apart from

feigning concern for bushfire victims, many of whom remain destitute and without replacement homes, Labor's pitch to voters was little different to that of the Liberal-National Coalition. Labor has given the government bipartisan backing throughout the pandemic, including its multi-billion dollar handouts to business and its profit-driven rush to prematurely "reopen" the economy despite the danger of fresh COVID-19 outbreaks, as is now occurring in Melbourne.

Eden-Monaro, with 110,000 voters, covers a wide area of southern New South Wales (NSW), surrounding the Australian Capital Territory, with Queanbeyan its biggest population centre. If Labor retains the seat, it will be only with the second vote preferences from the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers, a right-wing rural populist party, which picked up 5.5 percent of the vote. Labor also gained an estimated 20 to 30 percent of the preferences from the vote for the rural-based Nationals, who ran against their coalition partners, the Liberal Party.

Labor's poor showing was accentuated by the fact, that on average, federal by-elections produce swings of around 4 percent against the incumbent government. No federal government has picked up a seat in a by-election since 1920. Voters traditionally use by-elections to attempt to voice their hostility to the political establishment.

At the same time, the result was no comfort to Morrison's government. The Liberal Party vote rose by 1.3 points to 38.3 percent, despite the phony promotion of Morrison by the corporate media as a strong and popular figure in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Morrison is widely despised for his contemptuous response to the bushfires that ravaged last parts of the electorate.

The rifts in the Coalition was underscored by the fact that the NSW state leader of the Nationals advocated allocating second preferences to Labor rather than the Liberals.

The instability wracking the political establishment was highlighted by the precipitous fall in the vote for the third main party, the Greens. It gained just 5.6 percent of the vote, down 3.2 points from last year's federal election. It was a rejection of the "green new deal"—that is, boosting supposedly environmentally-friendly big business—championed by Adam Bandt, who was installed as Greens leader in February.

Labor claimed victory in Eden-Monaro last night without waiting for the Liberals to concede defeat. Despite Labor's loss of votes, Albanese proclaimed it an "extraordinary" and "very favourable" result. He was particularly anxious to boast of a win to stave off rumoured challenges to his leadership from within Labor, whose shrinking membership is wracked by factional infighting.

Labor cynically sought to exploit the suffering left by the bushfires by convincing a local shire mayor, Kristy McBain, to rejoin the party to become its candidate. McBain had received favourable media coverage during the fires, which caused widespread damage in the shire, centred on the rural town of Bega.

These areas saw some substantial shifts to Labor, without which the party would have lost the seat. The largest swing of any polling station in the electorate was in McBain's home town of Merimbula, where the central booth delivered a 16.3 point rise.

Albanese and other Labor leaders sought to dismiss Labor's loss of votes to the departure of Mike Kelly, a "popular" member of parliament—a hollow assertion that was echoed throughout the corporate media.

In fact, McBain, a former lawyer, typifies Labor's upper-middle class base, just as her predecessor in the seat, Kelly, epitomises the party's deep entrenchment within the pro-US military and intelligence apparatus.

Kelly, a junior minister in the last Labor government of 2007–13, resigned from parliament on April 30, citing health and personal issues. Just 10 days later, he confirmed that he had "taken up a job offer with Palantir Technologies." Palantir is a large Pentagon-connected private American software company that supplies data analysis and surveillance technology to military, intelligence and police agencies.

Palantir's equipment is used, among other things, to monitor immigrants, operate spy drones and conduct operations against WikiLeaks, whose imprisoned founder Julian Assange published documents exposing the war crimes, mass surveillance and conspiracies of the US and its allies.

Kelly was recruited by Labor as a "star" candidate in 2007 after commanding the Army Legal Services and playing a key role in the US-led occupation of Iraq. Kelly was a regular visitor to the Abu Ghraib prison, where detainees were tortured. He was one of the Australian military lawyers advising US forces on "interrogation" techniques, and drafting replies to the Red Cross justifying violations of the Geneva Conventions against torture and abuse of prisoners.

Albanese, who was elected Labor leader unopposed after last year's disastrous election loss to the widely-hated Morrison government, has made it clear that, regardless of the Eden-Monaro outcome, Labor will not change its pro-business policies.

Asked on Nine Network's "Today" TV show this morning if Labor's vote drop meant its policies "just don't have enough cut through," Albanese dismissed the suggestion. He again attributed the result to the loss of Kelly, hailing him as "a hero who had worn our uniform in the Defence Forces that served in the parliament." Now Labor had "found a champion" in McBain and this was "a very good result for Labor."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact