COVID-19 concerns trigger Liberal Party wipeout in Western Australian election

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Widespread public opposition to the corporate-driven demand for the lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions became the major factor in an historic disintegration of support for the Liberal Party in last Saturday's state election in Western Australia (WA).

By cynically exploiting this popular concern, and proclaiming a "hard border" approach to try to isolate the state from the global pandemic, the Labor Party obtained a sweeping electoral swing, winning seats in the wealthiest suburbs of Perth, the state capital, for the first time ever.

The result in WA, coming on top of fresh coronavirus outbreaks in Brisbane and Sydney in the past few days, is a further blow to the increasingly crisis-ridden federal Liberal-National Coalition government. It has insisted, on behalf of big business, that all border closures, lockdowns and other COVID-19 restrictions must be ended in order to fully reopen the economy for profit-making.

At the same time, the stunning wipeout of the Liberals underscores the volatility of the political situation and the fragility of the entire parliamentary establishment produced by the worldwide COVID-19 catastrophe, intensifying social inequality, mass unemployment and under-employment and the rising danger of a US-led war against China.

The decimation of the Liberals, while currently boosting the Labor Party, points to the deepening social and political discontent in the working class. That disaffection has been heightened by the worldwide toll of death, disease and impoverishment produced by the corporate-government failure to combat the pandemic, due to the elevation of profit interests over lives.

On the current count, Premier Mark McGowan's state Labor government is on track to hold 52 or 53 seats in WA's 59-member legislative assembly. That would decimate the Liberals, leaving them with just two or three seats, while the rural-based National party would be reduced to a predicted four seats.

The Nationals, who have no urban base of support at all, would become the official opposition party, unless they agree to a coalition with the Liberals, as exists in the federal government. Because the Liberals' vote imploded to just over 20 percent, Labor could also secure a majority in the state's parliamentary upper house for the first time in history, potentially winning 22 of the 36 seats, or possibly control the house with the support of the Greens.

If the results were repeated in WA's federal electorates, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's federal government would lose six seats, enough to remove it from office. This is not just a WA phenomenon. Labor also won recent elections in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, as well as New Zealand, by similarly posturing as standing firm for public safety.

Ludicrously, Morrison claimed to be buoyed by the WA outcome, saying it showed voters rewarded governments that took effective action on the pandemic. "Australians understand the difference between federal and state and I think this is a resounding endorsement of Mark McGowan's leadership, which I didn't find surprising," he said.

In reality, Morrison is presiding over continuing coronavirus outbreaks and vaccine debacles. Moreover, he always opposed the WA measures. It was the demand by Morrison's Coalition government last year, echoed by the WA Liberals, for the abolition of WA's border restrictions that fuelled the electoral disaster.

WA Liberal leader Liza Harvey had to quit late last November after calling for the opening of the border. She was replaced as party leader by a first-time parliamentarian, Zak Kirkup, who lost his own seat on Saturday. Morrison's government backed a High Court challenge to WA's border restrictions by billionaire Clive Palmer, before backtracking in the face of public opposition. Not surprisingly, Morrison kept out of WA throughout the election campaign.

Saturday's defeat was the second record electoral tremor in WA. Labor gained office at the previous WA election, in March 2017, after a then record statewide electoral swing against the previous Liberal Party government. Almost a quarter of the state's voters have swung to Labor since the Liberals won the 2013 state election.

The 2017 Liberal defeat intensified the crisis of Morrison's predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull. It was Turnbull's first electoral test since narrowly surviving the July 2016 federal election, after which he had clung to a one-seat majority. Eighteen months on, Turnbull became another victim of the

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factional turmoil wracking the Coalition, and was replaced by Morrison.

Morrison could face a similar fate, with his government already lacking a working majority in parliament as the result of a right-wing defection by a vehement Donald Trump supporter last month.

Although Labor is currently celebrating its WA success, the election underscored the lack of any firm electoral base for either of the two traditional ruling parties. The resulting volatility can be seen from the fact that at the May 2019 federal election, Labor won just five out of 16 seats in WA, with a near-record low primary vote of 29.8 percent. Last Saturday, Labor registered a primary vote of around 60 percent, yet that could soon dissipate.

As well as exploiting the popular opposition to the dismantling of COVID restrictions, the Labor Party benefited from near-universal backing by the WA-based corporate establishment, particularly the mining, property and media magnates, as well as the trade union bureaucracies and others in the political elite, including the Greens.

Throughout the election campaign, McGowan, a former naval officer, attacked the Liberals from the right, saying they would "bankrupt the state," accusing them of promising too much spending.

Labor's support among the wealthiest layers of society was underlined by its gaining all but one of the formerly blue-ribbon Liberal seats, such as Bateman, South Perth, Churchlands and Nedland, in Perth's most affluent areas. In his victory speech, McGowan particularly promoted this achievement. He thanked "the people who voted Labor for the first time in their lives."

In a revealing display, Labor's major fundraiser dinner during the election campaign was hosted by the biggest property developer in Perth, Nigel Satterley, a former staunch Liberal supporter. The event was held at the Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club in Perth's most expensive suburb of Peppermint Grove. Many of the state's prominent business leaders attended to mingle with McGowan and his ministers.

Far from being a WA aberration, this line-up epitomises the true character of the Labor Party as a servant of big business. Federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese equally enthused over the party's wealthy constituency. He hailed McGowan's "extraordinary" victory, saying it boded well for federal Labor's election prospects. "Many people have voted Labor for the first time, (which) shows they are open to voting Labor, and I take great encouragement from it," he said.

Since taking office in WA in 2017, Labor has made keeping the support of the mining magnates its top priority, including by granting project approvals, downgrading the Environmental Protection Agency and imposing a public sector wage cap.

Labor's pro-business record has been at the expense of the working class. Unemployment levels in areas around Perth are among the worst in the country. For all Labor's claims to defend public safety, its "Sustainable Health Review" produced a sharp drop in the rate of health spending compared to population growth, and a more than doubling of waiting times for ambulances to deliver patients into public hospital emergency departments.

The social crisis will intensify at the end of this month, when the federal government's JobKeeper wage subsidy and JobSeeker coronavirus supplement end, along with COVID-19 mortgage, rental and insolvency moratoriums, throwing millions of workers and small traders across the country into poverty.

Despite its "hard borders" stance, McGowan's government kept the border open for fly-in, fly-out mining workers to ensure there was no disruption to production and profits, and was responsible for a hotel quarantine failure that led to a five-day lockdown of Perth and nearby regions in February. A security guard at the hotel had contracted COVID-19 because neither the government nor his contract employer required mask-wearing or other basic safety procedures.

McGowan's government has so far benefited from record iron ore prices and gas exports from the state's north, primarily to China. Mining royalties worth more than $10 billion are expected to flow into government coffers this financial year, which is the primary cause of a projected $3 billion budget surplus.

But that largesse could soon be affected by the Biden administration's escalation of the conflict with China, with the Australian population placed on the front line, underlining the vulnerability of Australian capitalism.

That confrontation could not just end the WA revenue bonanza and deepen the social crisis. It could fuel rifts within the ruling class. McGowan's campaign slogan of "Keep WA Strong" made a definite pitch to WA parochialism and separatist sentiment, which has a long history in the state's business circles, in which there is anxious criticism of the anti-China offensive.

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