

Australia: Liberals survive Tasmanian election due to near-record low Labor vote

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After cynically calling an election nearly a year early to try to claim credit for supposedly protecting Tasmania from the global COVID-19 pandemic, the state Liberal Party government has barely scraped back into office.

The result underscores the instability of the political establishment nationally. Premier Peter Gutwein's government suffered an electoral swing against it for the second election in a row, but survived because the Labor Party's vote plunged to just 28.4 percent, a near-record low.

Due to postal vote counting and the state's complicated proportional representation system, it will be a week before it is known whether Gutwein's government will hold a majority in the 25-seat lower house of parliament, or fall one seat short, on 12. Throughout the campaign, Gutwein declared he would resign rather than lead a minority government, but his plea for a strong majority government fell flat, leaving his fate uncertain.

The Liberal Party banked everything on replicating the results in recent Australian state and territory elections—in Western Australia, Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory—which Labor governments won by posturing as successfully defending their populations against the pandemic.

Gutwein's parochial slogan, repeated endlessly, was: "Tasmania is now one of the safest places on the planet." No infections have been reported in the state since a severe outbreak in the island's northwest in April 2020, after which the state borders were closed for months.

Yet the Liberals lost votes, in sharp contrast to the 4 percent and 18 percent increases in the share of the primary vote obtained by the Labor governments in

Queensland and Western Australia at their state elections last October and March.

Significantly, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the federal Liberal leader, was kept out of Tasmania throughout the campaign, as he had been in Western Australia, where the March 13 election saw the Liberals decimated.

Morrison and his government are increasingly loathed, including because its claims of pandemic "safety," like those of Gutwein, are disintegrating in the face of the vaccine shambles, failed hotel quarantine facilities and frequent coronavirus outbreaks across the country.

With counting still continuing, the Liberals' vote fell 1.5 points to 48.7 percent, on top of a similar loss of support in the previous 2018 state election. But Labor's 4.2 point drop meant it lost one seat, to be left with nine.

This is Labor's third such drubbing in Tasmania since its 2010 to 2014 coalition government with the Greens was defeated in an election landslide after imposing austerity measures. In the multi-member Hobart-based electorate of Clark, Labor's vote fell to 22 percent, its lowest ever in any Tasmanian electorate.

The Greens' vote rose marginally, by 1.9 points, to 12.2 percent, after the party's worst result in decades in 2018, so the Greens will retain their two seats.

Several heavily-publicised "progressive" Independents became the initial recipients of the political discontent, obtaining 6.3 percent of the vote, up 5.2 points. One Independent, a local mayor, Kristie Johnston, is likely to secure a seat in Clark, where she currently sits on 11.4 percent of the primary vote.

Another symptom of the political instability is that the candidate on whom the Liberals are now counting to clinch majority government is Madeleine Ogilvie,

who was a Labor MP from 2014 to 2018. Her pre-election defection to the Liberals underscored the lack of any real difference between the two main capitalist parties.

Labor's debacle, on top of its 2019 federal election loss, points to the underlying breakup of its support in the working class nationally, regardless of its recent state and territory victories, which were based on claiming to oppose the Morrison government's most aggressive demands for economic reopening amid the pandemic.

Despite appalling conditions in public health, housing and education, Labor's claims to address the social blight lacked any credibility. That was not least because of its own record in inflicting deep cuts to schools and public services while in office from 2010 to 2014 in partnership with the Greens, matching the similar role of the federal Greens-backed Labor governments under Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd.

Tasmanian workers remain the poorest in the country, with average earnings more than 13 percent below the national figure. Public hospital waiting lists have skyrocketed. The number of people waiting for an outpatient appointment has topped 51,000—nearly a tenth of the state's population.

Reports have long surfaced in the media of nurses being forced to work double shifts due to shortages, emergency departments battling to cope and ambulances forced to queue outside before patients are admitted.

There has been a similar jump in the number of people waiting for public housing, rising 9 percent in a year to more than 3,800. Rent and house prices have surged, leaving more people homeless or struggling to find a home they can afford.

Labor's pro-business program was highlighted when it ditched its 2018 election posture of limiting the spread of gambling machines, which cause widespread financial losses and social distress in working class areas. This year, Labor secretly signed an agreement with the hospitality industry to "support the right" of pubs and clubs to operate poker machines, in line with the Liberals' stance.

Having led Labor to two election defeats, state party leader Rebecca White could face a leadership challenge from David O'Byrne, who is backed by several trade union bosses. But Labor's political disease goes far

deeper, reflecting decades of enforcing the dictates of the corporate elite in collaboration with the unions, especially since the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and their Accords with the unions.

According to media reports, Labor's third consecutive election disaster in Tasmania could trigger a takeover of the state party branch by Labor's national executive, on the pretext of curbing the infighting between rival factions of the union bureaucrats who control the selection of parliamentary candidates. That would make the Tasmanian branch the second—after neighbouring Victoria—to be under national executive rule because of worsening factional brawling and local branch-stacking.

For the Greens, the outcome was only slightly less disastrous than their 2014 and 2018 results, in which they lost more than a third of their previous votes. While posturing as a progressive "third party," raising concerns about global warming and the social crisis, the Greens have a long record of propping up capitalist governments.

The Greens joined their first de facto coalition with a Tasmanian Labor government from 1989 to 1992, and later backed a similar arrangement to maintain a minority Liberal government from 1996 to 1998. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Labor-Greens government of 2010 to 2014 destroyed 1,000 public sector jobs. Current Greens leader Cassy O'Connor was a key minister in that government.



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