

Australia: Victorian state election underscores crisis of major parties

Oscar Grenfell

28 November 2022

Saturday's election in Victoria, the second most populous state in Australia, has underscored a deep crisis of the main political mechanisms of capitalist rule—Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition and the Greens.

With around 65 percent of the vote counted, Labor has been re-elected and Premier Daniel Andrews is set to begin a third term in office. Labor will hold at least 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly, the lower house of the state parliament, meaning it can form a majority government.

The vote count for the Legislative Council, the upper house, is still in the early stages but it is likely that the Andrews administration will need the support of crossbenchers to pass legislation there.

Andrews and sections of the media have hailed the result as a major endorsement of Labor. This, however, is far from the case.

In reality, the result shows striking parallels with the May federal election. In that case, Labor was able to form government, despite its lowest primary vote since 1934 and major swings against it in working-class areas, only because the Liberal vote declined by even more.

Similarly, in the Victorian election the combined primary vote for Labor and the Coalition appears to be about 73 percent, compared with 78 percent in the 2018 election, almost 80 percent in 2014 and more than 90 percent in earlier decades. Some 27 percent of the population voted for an independent or so-called minor party.

The election campaign itself was a debased spectacle of mudslinging and mutual recriminations devoid of any serious discussion. In an indication of widespread disgust with the entire affair, a record number of citizens pre-pollled to avoid having to attend a polling place on election day.

Across the state, Labor's primary vote fell by 5.8 percent against its 2018 result. In the working-class areas that were once its electoral primary base, however, the decline was far sharper. There are different measures by which the shift can be calculated, but the swings against Labor in Melbourne's northern and western suburbs were at least 9 percent of first preference votes.

In some areas, the falls were even sharper.

In the northern Melbourne electorate of Broadmeadows, for instance, Labor received 68 percent of first preference votes in 2018. This election it received just 47 percent, a decline of 21 percentage points.

The working-class area was formerly a hub of Australia's car manufacturing industry. Successive governments, Labor and Liberal alike, assisted in the profit-driven destruction of thousands of jobs, culminating in the end of car production in 2016 with the closure of the Ford facility in the area. Broadmeadows is now afflicted by high rates of unemployment, poverty and social distress.

In the nearby electorate of Sunbury, Labor's primary vote this election was 44 percent, compared with 58 percent in 2018. In Bundoora, it was 48 percent compared with 56 percent. Similar figures were recorded in a number of other working-class electorates.

These are areas hit hardest by an inflation crisis as governments, led by the federal Labor administration, reject calls for any cost-of-living assistance, instead supporting real wage cuts and interest rate hikes that are resulting in soaring mortgage repayment rates.

These areas, moreover, have been hardest hit by the criminal "let it rip" COVID policies adopted by all of Australia's governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike. The Andrews government played a decisive role in this "reopening of the economy," dictated by corporate profit-making interests, which has resulted in more than 13,000 deaths across the country this year.

Throughout the election campaign, Labor made minimal promises on health and other social issues, which even if carried out would do nothing to address a breakdown of the chronically-underfunded public healthcare and education systems.

These more recent developments intersect with a deeper anger over Labor's decades-long role in presiding over continuous pro-business restructuring that has destroyed hundreds of thousands of jobs, decimated working conditions and suppressed pay. As was shown in the federal

election, broad sections of the working population correctly recognise that Labor does not represent their interests and is indistinguishable from the Liberals on all the fundamental questions.

Notably, swings toward Labor occurred in the more affluent eastern electorates of Melbourne, expressing the party's class character and constituency.

Those swings were part of another trend demonstrated by the result—the implosion of the Liberal Party at both the state and federal level. Its primary vote is now below 30 percent, after a small swing against it, even compared with a landslide defeat in the 2018 state election. Together with the Nationals, the Liberals may hold just 25 seats in the 88-seat lower house.

Party leader Matthew Guy announced his resignation on Sunday, but given the number of Liberal seats that have been lost, it remains unclear who will replace him.

The Liberal Party's debacle refutes claims that there is any turn toward right-wing forces by substantial sections of the population. During the campaign the Liberals made common cause with a right-wing milieu spawned by the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests that were heavily promoted by sections of the political and corporate establishment. These layers also formed their own parties, none of which won substantial support.

This underscores the fact that the lockdown and public health measures previously implemented in Victoria and other Australian states continue to have broad public support. Contrary to the media propaganda, the ending of those restrictions, dictated by a tiny corporate elite, is widely opposed.

Two “teal” independent candidates, based on support for “green” industries, may win seats in wealthy areas of inner-Melbourne. The Greens may increase their number of lower house parliamentarians from three to four, all of them in the relatively more affluent inner-city areas.

Significantly, under conditions of a swing against Labor and the Liberals, the Greens' primary vote increased by just 0.7 percent, and remains below the levels of elections in 2010 and 2014. Their ability to posture as an alternative to the major parties has been fatally undermined by their role in propping up federal and state Labor governments that have served the interests of the coal and gas companies while cutting social spending and attacking the jobs and rights of working people.

During the election, the Greens combined posturing over the climate crisis and tepid populist rhetoric with repeated pleas to Labor for some kind of power-sharing arrangement. Even though Labor will have a majority government, the Greens have spent the past two days pledging that they will work “constructively” with it.

The agenda of the incoming government, predetermined by the demands of the banks and the corporations, was systematically concealed from ordinary people by all the official parties and the media.

The Labor government is tasked with implementing sweeping attacks on the working class, in line with a national and international austerity offensive, under conditions in which Victoria's ballooning state debt is by far the largest in the country, much of it due to business handouts during the first two years of the pandemic.

This message was sent by the financial press in the days leading up to the election. The *Australian Financial Review* proclaimed the need for a “Kennett-style pro-business, fiscally responsible agenda focused on growing the state out of its COVID-19 hangover, and out of deficit and debt.”

Jeff Kennett's Coalition government carried out mass school and hospital closures and the privatisation of essential services after coming to office in 1992.

On election night, Andrews began his victory speech by favourably referencing former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating. This was a significant signal, given that Keating's government spearheaded pro-business restructuring in the 1990s. Andrews recalled advice from Keating that it was necessary to do “what is right,” not “what is popular.” That line will undoubtedly be repeated as the austerity agenda is rolled out.

Andrews also praised the role of the trade unions, which are to play the key role in enforcing the demands of big business and trying to suppress the struggles of the working class that this program will provoke.

But the unions, together with Labor, are in a crisis of historic proportions, with their memberships shrinking because of their history of betrayals of workers' struggles.

The anger and opposition of working people, which found a distorted parliamentary expression on Saturday, must be transformed into a conscious mass movement fighting for the socialist reorganisation of society against the ruling class program of war, 1930s-style social conditions and ever-greater authoritarianism. The Socialist Equality Party is the only political tendency fighting to build such a movement.



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