

Australian state election in Victoria deepens Liberal Party crisis

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4 December 2022

The Liberal Party's debacle in the November 26 state election in Victoria has deepened the crisis of that organisation, which has served as one of the pillars of bourgeois rule in Australia during the post-World War II period.

The incumbent state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews was returned for a third four-year term in office, despite a substantial decline in Labor's primary vote, especially in working-class areas. None of this anti-Labor "swing" however, benefitted the opposition Liberal Party, with its primary vote likewise declining. The Liberal Party received just under 30 percent of the primary vote, its worst result in Victoria since 1952.

This decline in votes for the major parties was in line with the unprecedented vote for other parties and so-called independents at last May's federal election, and reflects the accelerating crisis of the two-party system in Australia (see "Victorian state election underscores crisis of major parties").

As in Victoria, the Albanese federal Labor government won the national election and was able to form a majority in parliament only because the Liberals' vote fell more than Labor's.

The state election result in Victoria means that by the time of the next poll, scheduled for 2026, the Liberal-National coalition will have been in office in that state, the country's second most-populous, for just 4 of the previous 27 years.

Recriminations are flying thick and fast. In one characteristic comment, former Liberal state director Tony Barry told the *Australian Financial Review* that the result was "just a killing field for us, just a disastrous result. I think there needs to be a lot of soul-searching within the party."

With three seats remaining undecided, the Liberal

Party currently has just 18 of the 88 seats in the lower house. The National Party has another 9, but the leader of that rural and regional-based party, Peter Walsh, has not yet committed to maintaining the coalition with the Liberals.

Much of the post-election Liberal Party discussion has been on generational shifts and the issue of its ageing support base. According to one calculation, so-called Millennials (aged 25-39) and Generation Z (18-24) now represent 36 percent of the electorate in Victoria, double the proportion a decade ago. These voters reportedly favoured Labor and the Greens over the Liberals on a near 3-to-1 basis. Liberal voters were overwhelmingly older and wealthier than average.

"If these hard trends continue," one commentator in Murdoch's *Australian* complained, "the Liberal Party cannot win elections. It is just that simple."

The real issues underlying the crisis of the Liberal Party, however, are not generational but political. In the first place, the opposition in Victoria remains associated with far-right elements, including racist, Christian fundamentalist, and anti-vaccine extremists.

The last state election campaign, held in 2018, involved the Liberal Party promoting a lurid scare campaign based on outright lies about so-called African gangs. Even after that fell flat and the state Labor government increased its parliamentary majority, the Liberal Party was tainted by then Prime Minister Scott Morrison's efforts to forge a Trump-style populist, far-right movement in Australia.

When the pandemic hit in 2020 and COVID-19 transmission was repeatedly eliminated through lockdowns and other public measures in Melbourne, the Liberal Party flirted with far-right, anti-lockdown protest elements. This was backed by the Murdoch press, whose failed campaign against the state Labor

government included the promotion of baseless conspiracy theories about Premier Andrews promoted by anti-vaxxers. Numerous Liberal candidates had to be disendorsed or disciplined after media exposures of their ties with anti-LGBT Christian fundamentalist organisations or far-right figures.

Last month's election campaign featured the Liberal slogan, "Don't let him [Daniel Andrews] get away with it."

Many ordinary people, however, opposed, not the lockdown measures that helped save thousands of lives, but rather the premature lifting of COVID-19 health measures from late 2021 onward. Andrews played a critical role in providing the necessary political cover to Morrison and New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet as they all jointly coordinated the deliberate mass infection of the population with COVID. This "let it rip" strategy is in line with corporate demands for a permanent end to all health restrictions impinging on the accumulation of profit.

It remains unclear who will now be selected to lead the Liberal Party in Victoria after leader Matthew Guy resigned. Former shadow attorney general John Pesutto is regarded as the forerunner to replace Guy after he narrowly secured the wealthy Melbourne electorate of Hawthorn against a "teal independent" who campaigned on climate and anti-corruption issues. Pesutto is from the party's supposed "moderate" wing, but remains associated with the 2018 "African gangs" campaign.

The Liberals' right-wing faction insists that the opposition lost the election because it spent too much time talking about climate change measures and hospital and education spending promises.

Former state parliamentarian Tim Smith denounced the Liberal Party in the *Spectator* for thinking of "an election rather like an auction, a bunch of unrelated spending announcements." He recommended the party instead consider developing a comprehensive program along the lines of the ruthlessly pro-business, austerity package known as "Fightback" that the federal Liberal Party unsuccessfully promoted in the 1993 federal election campaign.

Smith's appeal is in line with pre-election demands from the *Australian Financial Review* for the imposition of a government in Victoria like that of 1990s Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett—one committed to

sweeping anti-working class austerity measures, including in public health and education, aimed at slashing the enormous state debt.

The problem confronting ruling class layers in advocating an open offensive against the social position of the working class is that there is no mass constituency for such a program. Former Liberal state president Michael Kroger bitterly complained during Sky News's election night coverage that neither the Liberals nor Labor felt able to detail planned spending cuts before an election, due to the anticipated electoral backlash.

This points to the broader political crisis confronting the Liberals and the entire pro-business political establishment under conditions of a deepening cost-of-living and housing disaster for millions of working-class households, a continuing COVID catastrophe and escalating military spending in preparation for war against China.

For now, the Andrews Labor government, which works in close collaboration with the trade union apparatus, remains the preferred instrument of big business in Victoria, as does the Albanese Labor government nationally. No small factor in the Liberal Party's crisis is the paucity of corporate funding it has received in the last period, with key donors favouring Labor.

Now that the Victorian election is out of the way, ruling class demands on the Labor governments will be stepped up to impose the necessary measures to satisfy the dictates of finance capital, which include deeper cuts to working-class wages, conditions and social services and a substantially reduced government debt.



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