

Australia: NSW leader Chris Minns typifies Labor's right-wing, pro-business character

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As the March 25 election in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, approaches, working people are confronted with a state Liberal-National Coalition government and a Labor opposition that agree on virtually everything, from the "let it rip" COVID policy to the need for austerity attacks on pay and conditions.

The bipartisanship, taken to new heights during the pandemic, has been a feature of every recent election. So too has been a crisis of the political establishment, with broad hostility among workers and young people to the official parties of big business.

These processes were a feature of the May federal election, where Labor and the Coalition received their lowest primary votes in more than 50 years. They were also on display in the November Victorian state election, where Labor retained office, despite sharp falls of its vote in working-class areas, only because support for the Liberal Party plummeted to historic lows.

All these tendencies, however, are finding particularly acute expression in the NSW election.

The state's Coalition premier, Dominic Perrottet, is widely despised. He hails from the Liberal Party's far-right faction. This month, Perrottet admitted that he had worn a Nazi uniform to his 21st birthday party in 2003. That belated confession was triggered by intensive factional warfare within the Coalition.

For his part, Minns is unknown to the vast majority of the population. Since becoming state Labor leader in June 2021, he has scarcely differentiated from Perrottet on a single issue. To the extent that Minns has criticised the Coalition government, it has largely been from the right.

Minns' political record is of interest, not only because of the approaching election, but because it is a concentrated expression of the character of Labor as a whole. What emerges is a party, and a political leader, unconditionally committed to the dictates of big business and without any, even nominal, connection to the working class.

Minns' background and early political career

Minns, hailing from an upper middle-class family—his father a school principal and mother a lawyer—has declared that it was former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating who inspired him to enter politics.

In a June 2021 *Sydney Morning Herald* article, headlined "Chris Minns vows to be NSW Labor's new Paul Keating," he stated: "Keating talked about the art of the possible. I found everything about him inspiring and it made you like politics, not recoil."

Minns was one of few young people so moved by Keating in the 90s. As *Workers News*, a predecessor of the WSWs, aptly noted at the time, Keating was the political equivalent of an "empty vessel" into which the ruling elite could pour whatever content it wished. If anything, Minns has taken this example to its logical extreme.

Keating had been treasurer of Bob Hawke's Labor administration, before becoming prime minister in 1991. Their governments implemented in Australia the program associated with Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. Working in partnership with the

Australian Council of Trade Unions, Labor deregulated the economy and presided over hundreds of thousands of job cuts, leading to the destruction of entire industries considered insufficiently profitable.

Minns, having been "inspired" by this example of politics "as the art of the possible," became a Labor member at the age of 18, in 1998. Throughout his career, Minns, a devout Catholic, has been in the party's "right" faction.

Such labels lost any meaning in the 1980s, as those within Labor who had previously presented themselves as "left" representatives of workers' interests and even of socialism, abandoned this posture. It is nevertheless of note that Minns identified himself, from the outset, with Labor's most openly pro-business and anti-working-class faction.

Official biographies have stated that Minns worked as an "on-call firefighter" while completing an arts degree at the University of New England, before being associated with a youth charity. These employments, however, appear to have been fleeting. To all intents and purposes, Minns has been a career politician his entire adult life.

In 2004, at the age of 25, he became a Labor member of the Hurstville City Council. His rise was rapid, and in the same year he was president of NSW Young Labor. In 2007–2008 Minns served a brief term as the deputy mayor of the large Sydney suburb. Around this time, Minns also worked as a staffer in the offices of right-wing state Labor MPs Carl Scully and John Robertson.

The then NSW Labor government pursued a program of privatisation and was widely reviled for its unflagging defence of the interests of property developers and other sections of business.

Minns was NSW Labor assistant secretary in the lead-up to the 2010 federal election and the 2011 state election. Its Sussex Street headquarters, where he worked, was the centre of the party's factional apparatus.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* profile in October 2021 said that at this time, Minns "was again searching for 'what could I do [next] to keep interested and keep interesting.'" These sentiments arose at the same time Labor suffered a devastating defeat in the 2011 state election.

Minns, together with his wife, formerly a prosecutor at the Director of Public Prosecutions and now a successful businesswoman, relocated their family to the US for 18 months. Minns had successfully applied for a scholarship to complete a Masters Degree in "public policy" at Princeton University, one of the wealthiest and most elite universities in the US.

Wikipedia notes: "Two U.S. Presidents, twelve U.S. Supreme Court Justices (three of whom currently serve on the court) and numerous living industry and media tycoons and foreign heads of state are all counted among Princeton's alumni body. Princeton has graduated many members of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Cabinet, including eight Secretaries of State, three Secretaries of Defense and two Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

At Princeton, Minns said he studied the "technical side of economics, econometrics and microeconomics." In addition to making important political contacts, the degree was clearly conceived of as a preparation for

greater things. As he told the *Herald* in its 2021 profile, the knowledge he gained was “important if you want to be premier.”

Minns in parliament

Minns was elected to the NSW parliament in 2015 as the member for Kogarah, a Sydney suburb. Minns’ maiden speech to parliament introduced one of the themes of his political campaigning.

Labor, he claimed, had been associated with “equality,” and other egalitarian “values.” To purportedly defend them, however, it was necessary for Labor “to change.” Concretely, this meant a diminution in the influence of the trade unions.

Such statements, repeated many times over the following years, were linked to his calls for Labor to become the party of aspirational voters, of “the suburbs” and to recognise that “Australians are ambitious.” Echoing the most aggressive sections of business, Minns was condemning even a nominal and entirely fictitious identification of Labor with the interests of working people.

This set the stage for repeated conflicts with the union bureaucracy. Despite the fleeting infrequency of Minns’ comments on policy matters over this period, unions would note his support for extensive privatisation.

The concern of the unions, however, was not Minns’ pro-business program. Functioning as a corporatised police force of company managements and governments, they had already implemented large chunks of it, including through their collaboration with the privatisation agenda of the previous NSW Labor governments.

The concern of the unions was that Minns’ program would sideline them, depriving the privileged bureaucrats of their seat at the “negotiating table,” where they bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of workers in exchange for substantial privileges.

A statement by the Newcastle branch of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) in 2019, opposing Minns’ first bid for leadership of NSW Labor, pointed to the bitterness of the conflict.

The union declared: “If Mr. Minns wants to lead a party of out-of-touch elitists who have no idea what life is like for regular Australians, he can go and have a crack at the leadership of the Liberal Party. The AMIEU has well-honed knife skills for dealing with rogues.”

In that unsuccessful 2019 tilt at leadership, Minns’ factional opponents would repeatedly point to his right-wing background and politics. For instance, one Labor “insider” told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “He is a political apparatchik. He has had little life outside of politics.”

At this point, Minns apparently shifted on the unions. In his 2019 leadership bid, Minns did win the support of the Health Services Union (HSU) and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA). HSU state secretary Gerard Hayes told the *Herald*: “I had a long discussion with Chris around his inaugural speech and Chris does not hold those views at this time.”

Minns changed his position 180 degrees, it seems. It had become clear that he would never become Labor leader without the backing of key sections of the union bureaucracy. Powerful sections of business, moreover, continued to insist that the unions were a crucial mechanism for suppressing the class struggle and imposing their demands.

Another issue in Minns’ background came up in May 2021, when the question of Labor leadership again emerged. Minns’ factional opponents, allegedly in the office of then leader Jodi McKay, circulated a dirt sheet on why Minns “can never run the NSW Labor Party.” It alleged, though without providing a skerrick of evidence, that Minns had been involved in the receipt of dubious donations from Chinese businessmen.

These allegations came as a campaign by the political and media establishment against purported Chinese “foreign interference” was in full swing. Politicians, both Labor and Coalition, who had courted Chinese donations and looked to the growth of Asia’s economies as a lucrative source of opportunities for the business elite, were unwittingly caught up.

Minns’ initial factional base was in the Hurstville area, where there is a large Chinese community. In his maiden speech he had made the unusual call for Mandarin to be taught in all primary schools, explicitly linking this to Chinese “investment opportunities.”

After the dossier, Minns dropped favourable references to China. The issue reemerged after he had become Labor leader. In February 2022, the media claimed that a trip he took to China in 2015 had been funded by billionaire Huang Xiangmo, a target of the “foreign interference” campaign.

Minns, while defending the tour and claiming ignorance of Huang’s involvement, was contrite over his earlier comments on China. It had been “wrong” to even suggest Mandarin lessons in the state’s schools. “If you look back at it in reverse, I wish I’d changed many things,” Minns said.

The issues of the unions and China were revealing in demonstrating Minns’ willingness to adapt himself to whatever appeared to be the prevailing sentiment of the Labor bureaucracy, and through it, of the ruling elite itself. The frequently noted blandness of his character, verging on the absence of any personality, is intimately connected to this adaptability. Minns’ whole career has been a bid to convince the bureaucracy and the capitalist class that he is best placed to serve their interests.

Minns as Labor leader

Minns became NSW Labor leader in June 2021, on the eve of an outbreak of the Delta strain of COVID. During his first weeks in that post, the Coalition government resisted implementing the necessary safety measures. It eventually instituted discriminatory, police-enforced measures in working-class suburbs, while preparing to overturn all restrictions.

The *Guardian* reported on an interview that it conducted with Minns shortly after he became leader. Minns, it stated, “wants to provide a positive vision of the state’s future rather than constantly criticising the Coalition government. He said the NSW premier, Gladys Berejiklian, had done a good job managing the Covid pandemic and he would not be playing politics on the issue.”

Minns would later make tepid criticisms of the discriminatory measures imposed in the working-class suburbs of Sydney, enforced by the police and the military. But absent any call for a broader and genuine COVID safety policy aimed at eliminating the virus, these comments largely dovetailed with the increasing demands of business for an end to all lockdowns.

Minns and NSW Labor supported the “reopening of the economy” in December 2021, which led to a catastrophic tsunami of Omicron infections. In a statement, Labor declared: “We’ve finally got a plan to reopen, now we need a plan to rebuild.” It was largely a demand for greater subsidies to business, after two years of unprecedented handouts. “The Government is asking businesses to reopen, but there is no indication of how they will be able to do that and what support will be available,” Minns’ Labor stated.

Since then, Labor has marched in lockstep in ending safety measures and ensuring ever more illness and death on the altar of profit. Since the May federal election, this “herd immunity” policy has been overseen by the Albanese Labor government.

Minns has supported the NSW Coalition government in its attacks on key sections of workers. Amid repeated nurses’ strikes, over the meltdown of the hospitals, he has rejected demands for nurse-to-patient ratios. Minns has denounced striking rail workers, and has insisted, together with the government, that any, even nominal wage increases must be paid for by increased “productivity,” i.e., poorer conditions and more intensive exploitation.

The bipartisanship has already found expression in the NSW election, with Minns and Albanese rescuing Perrottet after the admission of Perrottet having worn a Nazi uniform in 2003. Minns rushed in to declare

that the right-wing premier's apology had been "sincere and heartfelt."

In an opinion piece last week, essentially beginning Labor's campaign, Minns wrote: "From my first day as opposition leader, I have not hesitated to back good ideas from the NSW Liberal government. Whether it was dealing with COVID, or the national energy package, when they got it right, I backed them in. That's the way I practice politics, and it's the right thing to do."

Meanwhile, Labor has announced virtually no policies for the election, aside from a housing program that will do nothing to address the major social crisis in that area, but is instead aimed at propping up the inflated market, and pro-business infrastructure policies.

Its campaign, however, is already serving as the mechanism for attacks on the working class. The unions, in a series of key sectors, including healthcare and rail, have shut down any action by workers, despite the fact that they face sweeping cuts to wages and conditions, on the grounds of instead focusing their attention on ensuring the election of a Labor government.

This dovetails with Labor's broader role, federally and across the country. In lockstep with the unions, it is seeking to impose the demands for sub-inflationary wage rises, and for stepped-up pro-business restructuring. A key component is the further strengthening of the draconian industrial relations framework, and an even greater entrenchment of the role of the union bureaucracy within it, aimed at heading off an explosion of the class struggle.

In the figure of Minns, working people are confronted with the character of Labor as a right-wing party of the corporate elite, that does not differ with the Coalition on a single substantive issue.

That underscores the need for a political struggle against Labor, and a turn to a socialist program that advances the interests of working people, not business profits.



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