

Australian by-election defeat highlights Liberal Party crisis

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The Liberal Party, one of the two main parties in Australia on which the ruling class has relied since World War II, suffered a debacle last Saturday. It lost a federal by-election in a supposedly “safe” Liberal outer Melbourne electorate that it had held since 1990.

This is the first loss of a seat held by a parliamentary opposition party to a government in a federal by-election since 1920. That alone gives an indication of the historic depth of the crisis confronting the Liberals and the political establishment as a whole.

Over the past century, by-elections have traditionally provided voters with an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with governments. While the result in the outer eastern Melbourne electorate of Aston did not punish the Labor government, that was only because of a further implosion in the Liberal vote since last May’s federal election.

Various media commentators called the outcome cataclysmic, catastrophic, a disaster, a crisis or an earthquake. Clearly, the result is not simply a local one. It is the latest in a series of federal and state electoral defeats for the Liberal Party since 2020.

The party now holds just two federal seats in Melbourne, the country’s second largest city, and only 14 of the 79 seats nationally classified as urban by the Australian Electoral Commission.

The Liberals’ vote in Aston fell by about 4 percentage points to around 39 percent, on top of a similar crash in May’s federal election when the Liberals barely retained the seat.

Labor’s vote rose by 8 points to around 40 percent, assisted by a 2-point drop in the Greens vote to 10 percent. Labor’s share of the vote also may have been boosted by the fact that several right-wing parties, such as One Nation and the United Australia Party, did not stand in the by-election, having secured more than 12

percent of the vote last May.

This result in suburban Aston indicates a further disintegration of the Liberals’ electoral base. It follows the loss of long-held Liberal seats in many of the most affluent inner-city areas of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth last May, and losses in the state elections in New South Wales and Victoria, on top of earlier defeats in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.

That increases the reliance of the capitalist class on the Labor Party, which is currently in office federally and each state and territory, except for the small island state of Tasmania. The ruling class needs Labor to implement its agenda of austerity and war with the help of the trade unions, which are imposing deep real wage cuts on workers as the cost-of-living crisis intensifies.

In her victory speech, Labor’s successful candidate, Mary Doyle, a long-time trade union and superannuation fund official, noticeably paid tribute to the union movement and thanked its bureaucrats for their support. That underscores Labor’s reliance on the union apparatuses to contain and try to suppress the rising unrest among public sector and other workers over falling real wages, staffing shortage and unbearable workloads.

Labor was the main beneficiary of the substantial Liberal collapse in Aston, a relatively middle-class electorate that was previously regarded as part of the Liberal “heartland.” Such electorates, with a high proportion (41 percent in Aston) of home-buying mortgage-holders, were central to the vision of the party’s founder, Robert Menzies, in 1944 of establishing a big business party resting on a middle-class base of home owners and small business operators.

Corporate media and political commentators are

depicting the outcome as bolstering the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. “Aston result a big tick for Albo,” proclaimed the Melbourne *Herald Sun*. It stated that “Labor’s historic win in Aston is an emphatic endorsement of Anthony Albanese’s Labor government.”

Such promotion of Labor is driven by concerns in ruling circles about the underlying fragility of the parliamentary order.

Labor scraped into office last May after its vote fell to a near historic low of around 32.5 percent. It “won” only because the Liberal-National Coalition vote collapsed by more than 6 points to around 35 percent. The Aston victory gives Labor 78 seats in the 151-member House of Representatives—a slender majority margin up from one to just two.

In reality, as it was last May, the Aston result is overwhelmingly a negative one, directed against the Liberals, rather than any positive endorsement of Labor’s pro-business and pro-war program. The Liberals’ electoral disaster was compounded by the widespread hostility toward the hardline right-wing Liberal leader Peter Dutton, who was a key minister and powerbroker in the defeated Morrison Coalition government.

Aggravating the hostility to Dutton was the Liberal Party machine’s selection of his supporter, inner-city Melbourne barrister, Roshena Campbell, as its candidate. In addition, the by-election was triggered by the resignation from parliament of Alan Tudge, an education and social services minister in the Morrison government, following a series of scandals. This included his involvement in the “robo-debt” regime that illegally punished and traumatised tens of thousands of welfare recipients.

The Liberals’ Aston campaign focussed almost exclusively on blaming the Albanese government for the cost-of-living crisis of spiralling prices and interest rates. This is certainly causing immense financial and social stress for heavily-indebted working-class and lower middle-class households. But the Liberals, equally committed to the commands of the financial markets as Labor, could offer no alternative.

The by-election was also held in the shadow of the Albanese government’s announcement of the allocation of \$368 billion over 30 years for the purchase of nuclear-powered attack submarines, as part

of the AUKUS pact with the US and UK governments, clearly directed at preparing for war against China. That issue, which is widely opposed by workers and youth, was buried throughout the campaign, reflecting the bipartisan commitment to the AUKUS treaty, which was initially signed by the Morrison government.

For now, it appears that Dutton will survive as Liberal leader, primarily due to the absence of an alternative. However, the Liberals’ ongoing internal turmoil and faction-fighting, combined with the reality that Labor is imposing the requirements of the corporate elite and deepening the attacks on working-class wages and conditions, throw the future of the party into doubt.

While cynically portraying the Aston result as a vindication of his government’s policies, Albanese appealed for the Liberals to play a more cooperative part with the Labor government. He criticised Dutton for “just saying no to everything and not being a part of any solution. He’s become an observer of Australian politics rather than a participant.”

That reflects wider concerns in ruling circles about the dangerous political instability produced by the implosion of the Liberals as one of the twin parties on which capitalist rule has relied since 1944. An editorial in the Murdoch media’s *Australian* today declared: “In the national interest, as well as that of the Liberal Party, the Opposition Leader and the heads of the party’s organisational wing must rebuild the party’s base.” How that base can be reconstructed is far from clear, however, as the global economic and financial crisis worsens and the US government escalates its war threats and offensives against both Russia and China.

Moreover, Labor is hardly a firm pillar of political stability. Labor and the unions are already widely regarded with hostility by workers and young people after decades of pro-business betrayals, and that dissatisfaction will intensify as Labor steps up its efforts to impose the requirements of the financial markets, Australian capitalism and Washington.



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