

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews resigns amid developing political crisis in Australia

Oscar Grenfell**27 September 2023**

At a lunchtime press conference on Tuesday, Daniel Andrews announced that he was resigning as premier of Victoria, Australia's second-most populous state. There had been speculation for months that Andrews may have been preparing to quit, but his exit was nevertheless abrupt. He gave little over 24 hours notice, declaring that he would vacate the premier's office and parliament by 5 p.m. Wednesday.

Andrews resigned under conditions where Labor had won a substantial victory in the November 2022 state election, providing him with a third four-year term as premier. The Liberal Party opposition, heavily associated with an extreme right-wing anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine fringe, has been decimated. Labor now holds government at the federal level and in all states and territories bar Tasmania.

Despite the favourable parliamentary arithmetic, however, there are growing signs that the Labor administrations confront a deepening crisis, together with the entire political establishment.

There were parallels between Andrews' departure and the sudden resignation of Western Australian Labor Premier Mark McGowan in June. He too had years left in office, and confronted a Liberal opposition that had been reduced to a rump. There is also persistent speculation that Annastacia Palaszczuk's days as Queensland Labor premier are numbered.

The Australian resignations recall New Zealand Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's equally sudden decision to quit in January. That move occurred after Ardern had overturned New Zealand's successful zero-COVID policy, allowing the virus to rip and had begun implementing significant austerity measures, amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. The media hype, presenting her as a saintly figure, who would advance a humane agenda within the bounds of capitalist politics, had largely warn off.

A similar process is underway in Australia. While Andrews, like McGowan before him, suddenly discovered the need to spend more time with his family, the resignation is clearly politically motivated. It occurs amid a shift from the period of business oriented stimulus measures during the initial years of the pandemic, to harsh budget cuts.

The crisis of the Liberal Party means that carrying through this unpopular agenda falls almost entirely upon Labor and its affiliated trade union apparatus. McGowan and Andrews, both experienced political figures, undoubtedly recognised that Labor is going to confront major struggles by the working class.

At the federal level, there are growing warnings in the business press that the "honeymoon" period of Anthony Albanese's Labor government is over. Polling indicates Labor's federal primary vote is back near the 33 percent it received in the May 2022 federal election, its lowest result since the early 1930s.

The October 14 referendum to enshrine an indigenous advisory body into the Constitution is in a shambles. The measure had been intended to put a progressive gloss on a government committed to escalating Australian involvement in the US plans for war with China and implementing associated budget austerity. All polling, however, indicates that the Voice policy, a reactionary promotion of racialism and the Constitution, is headed for defeat.

The polling also indicates that the primary issue of concern for the vast mass of the population is the cost-of-living crisis, which is being inflicted on working people above all by the Labor administrations.

This broader context has largely been ignored in the media coverage of Andrews' resignation. It has been dominated by claims from Labor-aligned sources that Andrews was a major, even historic political figure, and angry denunciations from the right-wing press of "Dictator Dan" and his "left-wing" government, recapitulating their hostility to the COVID mitigation measures enacted by his administration in an earlier period. Both presentations are completely false.

Andrews, like the other state and federal Labor leaders, was a run-of-the-mill careerist politician whose record and persona underscored the fact that Labor no longer has any, even tenuous connection with the working class. Andrews has been in Labor politics literally his entire working life, having entered its apparatus immediately after graduating from university.

He became premier in December 2014 and seamlessly continued the pro-business policies of the preceding Liberal Party government. Andrews effectively privatised much of the public housing that remained and sold off the Port of Melbourne, VicRoads and the Land Titles Office.

The Andrews government maintained extensive ties with the property developers that play a central role in state politics across the country. Andrews himself was closely associated with trucking magnate Lindsay Fox, one of the wealthiest individuals in Victoria. The Andrews government, like all others across the country, collaborated closely with businesses and the trade unions, to suppress wage growth, eliminate jobs and enforce the ever-greater casualisation of the workforce.

The unfolding of the pandemic in Victoria can only be understood in the context of Andrews' pro-business record. His government, had along with previous administrations, maintained and deepened the cuts to public healthcare spearheaded by the Liberal Kennett government in the 1990s, which had closed seventeen public hospitals.

As a consequence, Victoria entered the COVID crisis with 2.3 public hospital beds available for every 1000 people, significantly less than the national average. A later report by the state Productivity Commission found that Victoria's public hospitals received \$2687 per person in recurrent funding in 2019²⁰, compared with a national average of \$2971 per person.

This was part of a broader gutting of public health. In March 2020, the Victorian public health department responsible for tracking communicable diseases had just 14 staff members, only six of whom were fully qualified physicians, in a state with 6.7 million people.

The development of the pandemic threatened the collapse of the healthcare system across the country, but the danger was particularly acute in Victoria. That state, a centre of the working class, also saw significant anger among teachers, healthcare workers and others over the prospect of policies that would allow the virus to spread.

The Andrews administration thus, in line with governments across the country, adopted a mitigation program. In Victoria, the scene of the worst outbreaks nationally in the first two years of the pandemic, this entailed extended lockdowns and other sharp restrictions. The lockdowns included various pro-business exemptions. They also involved punitive attacks on sections of workers and the poor, such as the police lockdown of two inner-city public housing towers in July 2020.

The lockdowns, however, succeeded in quashing outbreaks. Despite the fact that the Andrews' government and all other Australian administrations rejected a scientifically grounded zero-COVID program, the measures did repeatedly eliminate the virus, demonstrating in practice an alternative to the homicidal "let it rip" policies.

The Murdoch media and the right-wing press denounced the measures hysterically, helping to cultivate a fascistic anti-lockdown movement. The irony of the various monickers of "Dictator Dan" and his "autocratic government," is that the lockdowns were overwhelmingly popular and were one of the only official policies of recent decades implemented as a result of pressure from below.

As in the 2021 Western Australian election, the overwhelming reelection of Labor last year was bound up with a sense that it had helped to protect the health and lives of the population.

The other irony is that the media is silent on Andrews' real crime: dispensing with the successful COVID measures and facilitating mass infection. In the latter stages of 2021, he partnered with then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet to spearhead the lifting of all safety measures nationally. Andrews' credentials as a figure identified with the defence of public health were decisive. Morrison was widely despised, Perrottet was a far-right figure who had opposed all safety measures.

The reopening and ensuing COVID tsunami created a disaster. Whereas fewer than 2,300 people died of COVID across the country in the first two years of the pandemic, as many as 25,000 perished last year when excess deaths are factored in. More generally, there is now a new normal of continuing mass infection, illness and death.

The healthcare system in Victoria is in no better state now than it was in 2019. Hospitals are repeatedly sounding alarms signalling that capacity is exceeding demand. In late 2021, a study found that Victoria and most other states actually had fewer staffed intensive care beds than when the pandemic began.

Andrews' had turned to the policy of "post-pandemic restraint" and austerity, including through a brutal enterprise agreement imposed on the state's teachers with the assistance of the Australian Education Union last year. It entrenched intolerable conditions, and limited wage growth to less than 2 percent a year, one of the most punitive wage caps in the country. His May budget axed up to 4,000 public servants positions.

One of Andrews' last acts as a premier was to implement a new housing policy. It centres on the demolition of inner-city public housing towers, which will be replaced with a mix of "social housing" and private dwellings, in another boon to the property developers.

But with the state's gross debt above \$200 billion, much more is being demanded. Under those conditions, Andrews, like McGowan and Ardern, has decided to move on.

Amid warnings that his resignation could trigger a massive conflict within the government, the factional leaders stitched up a deal to install Jacinta Allan as premier unopposed. The speed is an indicator of fears over Labor's developing crisis, and a signal to big business that the new administration is going to proceed rapidly with the austerity demands.



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