

Australia: Tasmanian state Liberal government implodes

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Australia's last remaining Liberal Party-led government, in the island state of Tasmania, finally collapsed this week after nearly a year of minority rule. Premier Jeremy Rockliff called a snap election for March 23, more than 12 months ahead of schedule.

Despite last-ditch talks, Rockcliff failed to strike a deal with two nominally independent members of parliament, John Tucker and Lara Alexander, who defected from the Liberals last May, to keep propping up the government. The pair reportedly refused to sign a new agreement with Rockcliff that would have effectively pledged them to never criticise the government.

Tasmania is the country's smallest state, both in size and population, with about 570,000 residents. Nonetheless, the political turmoil highlights the decades-long and still-deepening instability of the increasingly discredited parliamentary order across the continent.

For a start, the government's implosion underscores the reliance of the ruling capitalist class on the trade union-backed Labor Party governments, currently in office federally and in every other state and territory. They are seeking to suppress the growing disaffection in the working class over Labor's entire program of pro-US militarism and support for the Gaza genocide, and the related imposition of the most severe cut to real wages and living conditions for decades.

Opinion polls indicate that the most likely outcome of the March 23 Tasmanian election will be another hung parliament, with neither the Liberals nor Labor able to secure a majority. The most recent poll conducted by the EMRS market research business last November had voter support for the Liberals down from the high 40s in 2021 to 39 percent. That was despite Labor's support changing little from 2021, sitting on 29 percent.

Any incoming government will therefore most likely depend on the Greens and assorted other formations and independents to maintain capitalist rule.

As is the case across the country, there are high levels of discontent over the cost-of-living crisis, a failing public

health system, and acute housing costs and shortages, all made worse by cuts to public sector jobs and wages.

In Tasmania, this unrest has been magnified by the Liberal government's commitment, backed by the federal Albanese Labor government, to spend what will be close to a billion dollars to construct a roofed football stadium in Hobart, the state capital, to satisfy the corporate profit-making demands of the Australian Football League.

There are many indices of a long-rotting parliamentary system.

First, this will be the second time in a row that the Liberal government has not seen out its full four-year term. In May 2021, it barely scraped back into office after cynically calling an election nearly a year early to try to claim credit for supposedly protecting Tasmania from the global COVID-19 pandemic, mainly by substantially shutting the state's borders.

Then led by Rockliff's soon-to-depart predecessor Peter Gutwein, the Liberals suffered an electoral swing against them for the second election in a row, but survived because Labor's vote plunged to just 28.4 percent, a near-record low.

The Liberals had banked everything on replicating the results in just-previous Australian state and territory elections—in Western Australia, Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory—which Labor governments won by posturing as successfully shielding their populations from the pandemic.

In every instance, however, these governments soon joined hands with the federal Morrison Liberal-National government in axing most basic public health precautions in order to let COVID loose for the sake of corporate profits. The Albanese Labor government intensified that disastrous course, at the cost of thousands of lives, after it narrowly gained office in May 2022, winning less than a third of the vote.

Second, both Rockcliff and state Labor leader Rebecca White are desperately appealing for votes on the basis that only they could provide political stability. Each has denied any intention to form a government through deals with the

Greens or any other party.

Yet the expansion of the single-house parliamentary assembly from 25 to 35, combined with the state's proportional representation voting system, has increased the likelihood that other parties or independents will win seats by exploiting the widespread disaffection with both Liberal and Labor.

For many years, workers and young people in Tasmania have suffered the country's lowest wage levels and among the worst public health, housing and schools. Both Liberal and Labor are cynically promising, once again, to rectify the social crisis.

Rockcliff released a video advertisement featuring cosmetic phrases like “our health system needs to be better,” “we need to do more to support those struggling with the cost of living,” and “for many Tasmanians, their first home lies beyond their reach and the rental prices are still too high.”

White announced a policy to cap power prices for households and businesses, supposedly by tapping into the profits of Hydro Tasmania, a state government business enterprise, while reassuring the financial markets that Labor would ensure “responsible government” to reduce the state's \$6.1 billion debt.

Every statistic points to an intensifying social crisis, however. For example:

- Recent data shows there are more than 58,000 people in Tasmania waiting to see a specialist through the public health system, and more than 8,000 people waiting for elective surgery.

Figures show 136 people have died in Tasmanian hospitals in the 24 hours after being “ramped” (kept) in an ambulance outside an overflowing public hospital for at least 30 minutes. The deaths occurred from 2018 to 2023, with the figures increasing throughout the five years, particularly at the Royal Hobart Hospital. In the 12 months to July, 44 people died—almost one a week.

- Launceston General Hospital, in the biggest city in the state's north, has had eight coronial findings against it about deaths in six years.

- The housing crisis is affecting a broader section of the working class than the 4,700 households waiting for social housing. Rents have soared in the private rental market, with Hobart's vacancy rate at 1.7 percent.

None of this has happened overnight. Rockcliff and White personify the crumbling grip of the political establishment that has long presided over these disasters.

Rockcliff, a farmer from Tasmania's north-west, first entered parliament in 2002—more than 20 years ago. He ascended to the premiership in April 2022 after eight years as the loyal deputy to Gutwein and before that Will Hodgman.

White is a typical Labor careerist. A former Labor political staffer, she gained an assembly seat in 2010 at just 27 years of age. She became state party leader in 2017, a year before the 2018 state election. White lost both the 2018 and 2021 elections, however, and briefly lost the Labor leadership to David O'Byrne, before regaining the leadership in July 2021 after sexual harassment claims were made against him.

Labor's politically-diseased state is not just a result of the 2014 election drubbing. It reflects decades of enforcing the dictates of the corporate elite in collaboration with the trade union bureaucrats, especially since the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and their corporatist Accords with the unions.

Third, the “stability” vows by Rockcliff and White fly in the face of the record. Since the late 1980s, a series of Tasmanian governments have ruled with the support of the Greens, whether formally or informally.

The Greens joined their first de facto coalition with a Tasmanian Labor government from 1989 to 1992, and later backed a similar arrangement to maintain a minority Liberal government from 1996 to 1998. In the wake of the 2008-09 global financial crisis, the Greens formed a coalition government with Labor from 2010 to 2014, inflicting severe cuts to schools and public sector jobs, resulting in a landslide election defeat.

This record points to another feature of the political fragility in Tasmania and nationally. While posturing for years as a progressive “third party,” claiming to be able to deal with global warming and the social crisis within the profit system, the Greens have a long record of propping up capitalist governments.

This week, Rosalie Woodruff, the state Greens leader since last July, made it clear that her party wants to continue that role. She said the Greens were aiming for a “balance of power,” to influence the major parties on environmental matters. While demagogically criticising the Liberals and Labor for having “too much a focus on boosting profits for corporate mates,” she promised: “We will work collaboratively.”



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