

Australia: Tasmanian Labor leader tries to distance herself from AUKUS

Mike Head
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Just days before a snap state election this Saturday, Tasmanian Labor Party leader Rebecca White declared that a Labor-led state government in the southernmost Australian state would not permit nuclear-powered AUKUS submarines to berth in any of the island state's ports.

This is a bid to distance herself and the state Labor Party from the federal Labor government's ratcheting up of the widely-opposed AUKUS military pact with the US and UK, which is clearly a preparation for war against China.

White told last Saturday's *Weekend Australian* that people in Tasmania would not welcome nuclear submarines berthing at the deep-water port in Hobart, the state capital, or the state's other potential port at Burnie on the island's north coast. "I don't think Tasmanians would be very happy about that at all," White said.

White and the Labor leaders are desperately trying to secure enough votes to form at least a minority government by posturing as having reservations about the preparations for a potentially catastrophic US-instigated war against China.

They are clearly aware of the popular hostility in Tasmania and across the country to Labor's militarist program, intensified by its support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

This anti-war sentiment and disgust toward Labor's ongoing complicity in the slaughter of Palestinians is compounding a long-developing crisis of the political establishment in Australia.

Tasmania may be the smallest state by territory and population (about 570,000), but it has become an acute expression of the political disaffection caused by decades of a pro-business offensive imposed by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike that has produced deteriorating living conditions and staggering social inequality.

The latest Tasmanian opinion poll, published by the Australia Institute in the first week of March, showed that Labor's primary vote support had plunged to 23 percent. That was despite the implosion of the state Liberal government, which was forced to call the early election after two parliamentary defections reduced it to minority status.

For all her submarine posturing, White refused to criticise Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government for

intensifying the previous Morrison Liberal-National government's commitment to AUKUS, including by allocating up to \$368 billion for long-range attack submarines.

Instead, she effectively endorsed the AUKUS program, which was enshrined in Labor's platform at its national conference last August. "They [the Albanese government] have made an investment in the strategic capability of our defence force—it's their decision," White said. "It's their responsibility to make those decisions on behalf of the nation, based on the best advice that they have. I'm not going to interfere in defence matters."

Since AUKUS was announced in 2021, US and British nuclear-powered submarines have already started to visit Australia. They are due to have a "rotational presence" in Western Australia from 2027 and would be expected to berth in other ports.

No Tasmanian port has been publicly identified as a potential basing facility for AUKUS submarines. Last August, however, the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency cleared Hobart's port to host nuclear-powered vessels, prompting widespread concern.

At that time, Greens leader Rosalie Woodruff sought to capitalise on the opposition by warning that Tasmania could become a nuclear war target, but the Greens have issued no statement on AUKUS this week. That reflects their underlying alignment behind the offensive against China.

Equally aware of public disquiet, Liberal Premier Jeremy Rockliff refused to commit himself on nuclear submarine visits. He maintained his 2022 position that it was "a debate for another day."

Saturday's election takes on added significance because the decade-old Tasmanian Liberal administration is the only non-Labor government in Australia, whether at the state, territory or federal level.

If this government falls, as the polling predicts, capitalist rule across the country will depend even more on the capacity of the Labor governments to suppress working-class unrest in partnership with the Labor-affiliated trade union apparatuses. The federal Albanese Labor government was itself elected in May 2022 with a slim margin on a primary vote of 32.5 percent.

The polls indicate that the election is likely to produce a hung

parliament, with either the Liberals or Labor relying on the Greens, the right-wing populist Jacqui Lambie Network and/or “independents,” including various party defectors, to form what would be an unstable de facto coalition government.

The Australia Institute poll, conducted on March 4 and 5, found the Liberals getting 37.1 percent of the first preference vote, with Labor on 23.0 percent, followed by the Greens on 13.7 percent, the Jacqui Lambie Network on 8.5 percent, independents on 12.8 percent and “Other” on 5.0 percent.

That suggests that the combined support for the two parties, Labor and Liberal, that have ruled in the state, and nationally, since World War II, has fallen to a new low of just 60 percent.

This discontent and political fracturing is developing amid a devastating social crisis. After 10 years of state Liberal government, and nearly two years of the federal Labor government, the public health and hospital system is breaking down, thousands of people are experiencing housing stress or homelessness, and the cost of living is far outpacing workers’ wages.

Recent data provides some idea of the social distress. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that Tasmania has experienced a shocking rise in homelessness, up by 45 percent, from 1,622 homeless people in 2016 to 2,350 in 2021.

The average Tasmanian renter is paying \$7,000 more annually than five years ago. Back then, the median rent in Tasmania was \$311 per week. Today, it is \$445. Over the past decade the waiting list for social housing has almost doubled.

A recent report showed that, due to federal rebate cuts, most of Tasmania has no medical GPs who bulk-bill under the Medicare public insurance scheme, thus forcing people to pay upfront \$80 or more to see a doctor. In Hobart, the bulk-billing rate was 1.9 percent, far below the national rate, which has dropped to 16.3 percent.

As a result, people are forgoing or delaying medical treatment or ending up in crowded public hospital emergency departments. At the same time, the Albanese government’s first budget slashed COVID-19 pandemic spending, creating severe staffing and resources shortages in public hospitals.

In 2022?23, an average of nearly 1,800 patients a month were “ramped” in ambulances waiting outside Tasmanian public hospitals—up from about 300 a month in 2015?16. During the four years to 2023, 136 people died in hospitals within 24 hours of being ramped for at least 30 minutes.

None of this will improve after the election, no matter what token promises are made by the contenders who form government. In fact, the cuts will deepen to meet the requirements of the financial markets. State Treasury’s pre-election financial outlook report forecast continuing budget deficits, with net government debt almost doubling from \$3.3 billion to \$6.1 billion by 2027.

The anger over the deteriorating conditions has been magnified by the state Liberal government’s commitment, jointly backed by the federal Labor government, to spend

almost a billion dollars to build a stadium in Hobart to satisfy the corporate profit-making demands of the Australian Football League. That epitomises the subordination of the lives and needs of working people to the dictates of big business.

Amid this social and political polarisation, the Greens and federal Senator Jacqui Lambie have pledged to help form an “stable” government to avoid the “chaos” being warned of by the corporate media.

Greens leader Woodruff is promoting her party’s track record of shoring up governments, while presenting itself as a “progressive” third party. “Liberal and Labor politicians like to run scare campaigns about minority parliaments not providing stability,” she told the media.

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. After the 2008?09 global financial crisis, the Greens formed a formal coalition government with Labor from 2010 to 2014, inflicting severe cuts to schools and public sector jobs, resulting in a landslide election defeat.

Likewise, Lambie told the *Australian* that her members could work with either Labor or Liberal. “The ‘instability’ line that both major parties push every election is just rubbish,” she said. Lambie, once a Liberal Party member, is heavily involved in similar horse-trading in Canberra to help pass the Albanese government’s legislation.

For her part, White said Labor is open to “no strings” arrangements with other parties and independents to form a minority government without offering them ministerial posts. That would depend on those groups signing letters to the state governor indicating support for Labor to form a government.



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