

Labor government suffers landslide defeat in Australia's Northern Territory

Mike Head**25 August 2024**

After eight years in office, during which the already shocking social conditions have deteriorated seriously, the Labor Party government in Australia's geo-strategically crucial Northern Territory (NT) suffered a sweeping defeat in Saturday's territory election.

The right-wing Country Liberal Party (CLP) will hold as many as 16 of the 25 seats in the NT legislative assembly. Labor's vote crashed from 39 percent to around 30 percent, allowing the CLP to pick up 48 percent, with the rest going to the Greens and local independents.

Depending on the final vote counts, Labor will be reduced to a rump of just four or five seats, most likely losing all but one of the urban seats it previously held in the capital, Darwin and nearby Palmerston. Labor's Chief Minister Eva Lawler was thrashed in her own electorate, suffering a 20 percent loss of votes. Only eight years ago, the widely reviled CLP had been reduced to two seats.

Lawler had been installed as chief minister last December in a last-ditch effort to prevent a landslide defeat. Her predecessor, Natasha Fyles, abruptly resigned, becoming the fourth Australian state or territory Labor Party leader to do so within six months. Fyles also had been in office for just 19 months since the sudden departure of her predecessor, Michael Gunner, in May 2022. However, none of the leadership switches altered Labor's right-wing course.

Although the NT is Australia's smallest jurisdiction in population—about a quarter of a million people—the collapse in Labor's vote is not a local aberration. It is in line with national polls, which indicate the likelihood of a minority government after the federal election due by May, to be headed either by Labor or the Liberal-National Coalition, which includes the CLP.

Moreover, the result has a particular significance because the NT covers vast areas of northern and central Australia, where the Albanese Labor government is ramping up the US military presence without any popular mandate. It is transforming the territory into a base of operations for a potentially catastrophic US-led nuclear war against China.

The landslide defeat is a measure of the discontent with Labor's pro-business record in the NT and nationally, compounded by the worsening working-class cost-of-living

crisis and the deplorable conditions in the public schools, hospitals and housing, significantly affecting the indigenous people who make nearly a third of the NT's population.

Contrary to the media coverage claiming that the CLP has won a remarkable victory, the results do not express mass support for it. In fact, almost as many people did not vote at all as voted for the CLP. Despite voting being compulsory, voter turnout fell from 75 percent at the last NT election in 2020 to 57.6 percent, the lowest on record. That is, 42.4 percent of the enrolled voters did not cast a ballot.

This reflects the deepening disaffection and disconnect among indigenous people, and workers and youth more generally, with the corporate-dominated political system as a whole.

In some remote areas, the participation rate fell to around a third. In many of these areas, the Labor government continued to deprive Indigenous communities of even basic services such as clean water and sanitation, let alone adequate schools, health care and housing,

Throughout the election campaign, Labor joined hands with the CLP to turn it into a foul contest as to which could be the harshest on a "law and order" agenda of further boosting repressive measures. Both vowed to spend millions of dollars to build new prisons in Darwin and Alice Springs and sharply increase police numbers in the NT, which already has the highest incarceration and per-capita police rates in Australia.

Backed by the corporate media, both parties thus sought to bury the real issues that confront the population across the country—the worsening living conditions, deepening social inequality and the Albanese government's further militarisation of the continent, in line with its support for the US-supplied Israeli genocide in Gaza, the US-NATO war against Russia and the preparations for war against China.

The CLP's incoming Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro vowed to lower the age of criminal responsibility to 10 during the first week of the new parliament, as well as introduce youth "boot camps," laws to bar most bail applications and impose further arrest powers for police. She also declared she would bring back truancy officers to punish students and parents for non-school attendance.

Labor responded by matching many of the proposals.

Lawler, for example, pledged to expand residential youth justice facilities, where detainees would be held for “three to six months.”

Labor has been in office in the NT for 19 of the past 23 years. Its record includes:

- Public hospitals remained understaffed and underfunded, resulting in numerous crises and failures. Because of widespread poverty, hospitals are overwhelmed with diabetes admissions, with some patients, including younger and younger Indigenous people, requiring amputations.

- In public schools, Labor maintained a punitive attendance-based funding model. Some school buildings lack power and water, and 78 remote indigenous communities have no access to local secondary education, resulting in high dropout rates, social problems and substantial rates of criminal convictions.

- Across the territory, homelessness affects 16.5 percent of people under 18.

- A High Court case brought by 70 tenants from Ltyentye Apurte/Santa Teresa, approximately 85 kilometres from Alice Springs in central Australia, showed that the NT housing department had refused to rectify critical, even potentially life-threatening faults in indigenous social housing, such as the lack of a back door, no air conditioning, water leaks, broken toilets, and insect infestation.

- Aboriginal prisoners account for 84 percent of adult prisoners and 96 percent of youth detainees. Most of the supposed government “Indigenous expenditure” in the NT has gone to running prisons holding Indigenous inmates.

Last year, Albanese personally joined the NT Labor government in responding to a media witch hunt about “youth crime” by reimposing alcohol and other restrictions on indigenous communities, as well as two curfews in Alice Springs. In effect, Labor reinstated police-state measures imposed during the socially disastrous 2007 police-military intervention into the NT by the federal Howard Coalition government.

This record further exposes the claims of the Albanese government that last year’s failed October 14 referendum on inserting an Indigenous Voice assembly into the Australian Constitution would have meant “better outcomes” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Far from a uniform swing to the CLP, Labor also lost votes in Darwin suburbs for its “youth crime” offensive and its pursuit of fracking and other gas projects, with one seat possibly going to an independent and another to the Greens.

Last year, backed by the CLP, Labor gave the go-ahead for gas fracking exploration by Tamboran Resources and other companies for a possible 6,000 wells in the Beetaloo Basin in the NT’s interior, between Katherine and Tennant Creek. That decision overrode strenuous objections by scientists, indigenous leaders, environmental groups and cattle industry pastoralists.

With the CLP’s total support and \$3.5 billion in federal funding by the Albanese government, Labor also vehemently

pushed ahead with plans to clear away a mangrove-clad peninsula to build a huge new port facility on Darwin Harbour’s Middle Arm, partly to export Beetaloo gas.

What was not mentioned in the election campaign was that this project, first initiated by the previous Morrison Coalition federal government, is tied to US plans to make Darwin a central base for war, reprising its role against Japan during World War II.

In March 2022, the then-Defence Minister Peter Dutton, who is now the Coalition leader, said the Middle Arm project could support military development. That followed the US military’s announcement that it would construct a \$270 million, 300 million litre, above-ground jet fuel storage facility at Darwin’s East Arm.

Darwin has become a frequently visited port for US warships transiting through the Pacific or across the Indian Ocean and hosting visits from the Seventh Fleet based in Japan. Since a deal struck by the Gillard Labor government with the Obama administration in 2011, the US has also maintained a rotational deployment of US marines in Darwin, with numbers now reaching up to 2,500.

The transformation of Darwin and the NT into a US war platform was highlighted last week when Michael McCaul, the Republican chair of the US House of Representatives foreign affairs committee, said Darwin was “the central base of operations in the Indo-Pacific to counter the threat” from China.

For geographic and strategic reasons, about 30 bases in Australia are increasingly pivotal to American global military and intelligence operations designed to encircle and confront China. They include seven airfield, port or troop facilities and training grounds in or near Darwin, the Tindal air base 300 kilometres away at Katherine and the Pine Gap satellite surveillance facility, near Alice Springs, which covers the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East.

No one voted for any of this last Saturday.



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