

Australia: Tasmania in political limbo after Labor's vote drops to record low

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Australia's island state of Tasmania remains at a political impasse after last Saturday's state election. The results again point to the deepening disintegration of support nationally for the two main parties of rule since World War II—Labor and the Liberals.

After the fourth state election in seven years, the outcome is another hung parliament. Neither the caretaker state Liberal government nor the Labor Party obtained anywhere near enough seats to form a majority administration.

Although Tasmania has the smallest population of any Australian state—about 575,000 residents—it has become a concentrated expression of the deteriorating living and social conditions for the working class throughout the country, and the resulting political disaffection.

It will be more than a week before the final votes are counted. But the most likely outcome is that the conservative Liberals will hold 14 or 15 seats in the 35-member lower house of parliament, with Labor taking 10 seats, the Greens five and the rest going to an assortment of up to five independents, mostly described as "progressive."

Both the Liberal and Labor leaders are desperately courting the independents, and the business leaders, for support to form a new minority government. Regardless of which prevails, however, the result can only be an extremely unstable government.

Most significantly, Labor's vote plunged by three percentage points since the 2024 state election to 25.9 percent. This is its lowest vote in more than a century. That indicates a further long-term shattering of Labor's former working-class base.

The media has largely depicted the electoral disaster as a backlash against Labor teaming with independent MPs six weeks ago to force yet another early state election—just 16 months after the last—through a vote of no-confidence in Premier Jeremy Rockcliffe's shaky minority Liberal government.

What has been covered up in the media coverage, at least outside Tasmania, is the right-wing, pro-business character of Labor's election campaign, which mirrored the program of the Albanese federal Labor government.

Labor attacked the Liberals from the right, accusing them of bankrupting the state by over-spending, sending the public debt

to an unprecedented \$4.2 billion, with the state Treasury department's pre-election financial outlook projecting that to grow to \$13 billion by 2027-28. Labor vowed to implement \$1 billion in cost-cutting over the next four years, boasting of "the most comprehensive fiscal plan of any opposition in Tasmania's history."

Labor leader Dean Winter won praise from business chiefs by proposing a roundtable, featuring business and trade union leaders, to hatch plans to impose the cuts on workers. That promise echoed the Albanese government's "economic reform roundtable" scheduled for next month to discuss how to ramp up "productivity," that is the rate of exploitation of worker's labour power.

The state's peak employer group, the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which previously declared that the Liberals' debt and deficit levels were unsustainable, publicly welcomed Labor's plan. The plan included selling off the state's share in the proposed Marinus Link power cable connector across the Bass Strait to the mainland, exposing Labor's claims to oppose privatisation and public asset sales.

During the final stage of the election campaign, Labor made a last-ditch effort to capitalise on discontent over the shocking conditions in the state's public hospitals, schools and housing by promising to set up five "TassieDocs" medical centres where patients could see doctors under the federal Medicare system without paying fees.

But that pledge flew in the face of Labor's budget-slashing plans, under worsening social conditions where, for example, the Tasmanian Council of Social Service estimates that 120,000 people—more than one in five—live below the poverty line, the child poverty rate is 24 percent, and there are long waiting lists for social housing, with 5,094 people on the priority waitlist as of April.

Yesterday, despite Labor's electoral disaster, Winter made an immediate pitch for corporate support to form a minority government on the basis of Labor's \$1 billion cost-cutting plan, regardless of whatever pacts, formal or informal, he has to make with crossbenchers. He told the media: "I've already been speaking to the business community this morning to reassure them that Tasmanian Labor won't be changing from our support for those things."

Winter again declared that Labor would not do any deals with the Greens, despite anxious appeals from the Greens' state leader Rosalie Woodruff for collaboration to seek to stabilise the political order.

Woodruff nevertheless indicated that the Greens' professed opposition to the bipartisan Labor-Liberal support for the construction of a widely popularly opposed \$1 billion football stadium, and extended salmon factory fish farming and native forest logging, would not stand in the way of striking an agreement to prop up a Labor government.

"Yes, there are differences, but the Greens and Labor have a lot in common too," Woodruff told reporters.

By posturing as critics of the bipartisan corporate agenda—even referring to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza—the Greens held their vote of about 14 percent of the electorate.

In fact, as demonstrated again by Woodruff's pleas, the Greens are a loyal capitalist party. They have previously propped up business-backed minority Labor and Liberal governments alike. They joined their first de facto coalition with a Tasmanian Labor government from 1989 to 1992, later helped maintain a minority Liberal government from 1996 to 1998, then joined a Labor government from 2010 to 2014, leading to a landslide defeat.

Rockcliffe, still a caretaker premier, is also trying to patch up support for a fragile minority government. He is seeking backing from ex-Labor state leader David Byrne and various other independents, most of whom also claim to oppose the football stadium, salmon farming and logging.

Rockcliffe said he would go to see the state governor, Barbara Baker, the monarchy's representative, for permission to test his support on the floor of parliament once the allocation of seats is clear next month. That highlights the anti-democratic power that resides in the hands of the unelected governor, a former judge, to determine who tries to form the next government.

Because of Labor's pro-business pitch, the Liberals' vote increased by 3 points to 39.9 percent. But their capacity to survive in office is in doubt because the election also marked the collapse of the Jackie Lambie Network, a right-wing populist formation. Its three former members of parliament lost their seats after supplying the votes in parliament to keep the Liberals in office following a heavy swing against Rockcliffe's government in last year's election.

These three MPs look set to be replaced by "progressive" independents, marking a shift, albeit politically unclear, by many voters to try to find an alternative to the twin parties of the corporate establishment.

More fundamentally, the underlying implosion of support for Labor and the Liberals makes unlikely the formation of any majority government under Tasmania's proportional representation system.

This reflects a growing political crisis nationally, and

internationally, as capitalist governments confront rising discontent with austerity programs, widening social inequality, soaring military spending, support for the Gaza genocide and war drives.

Labor leader Winter had sought to emulate the victory of the Albanese government in the May 3 federal election. But Labor won the federal election despite obtaining only about a third of the primary vote. It retained office because the Liberal vote fell further to around 25 percent, largely due to its association in the minds of voters with the trade war, militarist and fascistic agenda of the Trump administration.

Having profited electorally from the widespread concerns with the Trump agenda, the Albanese government is now confronted with the task of imposing it, including by boosting military spending and intensifying its commitment to US-led war preparations against China.

With the corporate media suppressing all mention of Trump and the danger of economic crisis, war and authoritarian rule during the Tasmanian election campaign, Labor's vote dropped to a record low, underscoring the historic dimension of the political crisis.

Today's editorial in the Murdoch media's flagship *Australian* must be taken as a warning of the anti-democratic response of the ruling class. It called for a "hard look" at "Tasmania's arcane Hare-Clark proportional representation voting system" because "it seems unlikely to deliver a government with a clear majority in the foreseeable future."

The editorial also indicated the scale of the austerity measures demanded of whichever government is cobbled together. Citing the Treasury's pre-election forecast, it said the size of the "challenge" equated to "cutting government spending by 25 percent, increasing state taxes by 250 percent or slashing 20,700 of the state's 33,200 public servants."

Fighting this agenda, and the mounting war danger, means transforming the social, political and anti-war discontent in Tasmania and globally into a conscious movement of the working class against the capitalist system itself, and for socialism.



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