Victorian election debate: Promises to big business, lies to working people

Eric Ludlow, Oscar Grenfell
18 November 2026

The only leaders' debate of the Victorian election campaign, held Tuesday night, was a degraded and banal political spectacle, dominated by promises to big business and lies to working people.

Labor Premier Ben Carroll, Liberal leader Jess Wilson, One Nation's Warren Pickering and Greens leader Ellen Sandell appeared before 100 pre-selected undecided voters at an event billed, absurdly, as a "People's Forum" by the Murdoch media, which has spearheaded demands for sweeping public spending cuts.

The developing global war was excluded. Australia is directly implicated in its various fronts: the US-led military build-up against China, support for Israel's assault on Gaza and military assistance to Ukraine. Yet the discussion proceeded as though Victoria existed in isolation from the rest of the world.

The debate's central theme—competing pledges to reduce Victoria's mounting debt—was itself an expression of the global offensive against the working class. Internationally, governments are preparing massive austerity measures while funnelling ever greater resources into militarism and war.

Carroll and Wilson each sought to convince big business that they were best placed to carry out this agenda.

The opening question concerned Victoria's debt of more than $160 billion and its daily interest bill of approximately $24 million.

Carroll proclaimed himself a "financially responsible Premier," boasting that debt had fallen by $1 billion a month since he took office. He insisted that he had already made "tough" decisions to reduce spending.

Later, confronted with the Business Council's complaints about operating in Victoria, Carroll declared: "I'm a pro-business, financially responsible Premier." He pledged to welcome corporate investment: "I will go to the airport and welcome any business I can."

Wilson sought to establish her own credentials, promising more than $26 billion in "savings" and a cash surplus by 2032. Her proposals include a decade-long public-sector hiring freeze, supposedly saving $22 billion.

These were explicit pitches to the corporate establishment. The promised reductions cannot be achieved through minor "administrative efficiencies." They entail the destruction of public-sector jobs, further understaffing of hospitals and schools, and the deterioration of services already struggling to meet basic needs.

Victoria's enormous debt, accumulated in part through corporate subsidies, tax concessions and other measures benefiting big business, provides the pretext for making workers pay. Labor has already announced billions in "savings" and reductions in public-sector employment and services. The scale of the debt and the commitment by all the establishment parties to either drastically reduce or eliminate it can only produce unparalleled poverty, destitution and despair among broad sections of the working class and youth in Victoria.

The cynicism of the leaders' promises to address the social crisis was underscored by their commitments to policies that will inevitably worsen it. They pledged to improve hospitals, schools and living standards while competing to demonstrate how much public spending they could eliminate.

Carroll promised 20 public dental clinics and shorter waiting lists, while presenting himself as the defender of Medicare against the Liberals.

But Labor has governed Victoria for 33 of the past 44 years, presiding over the deepening crisis of public healthcare and the expansion of private medical services. More than 70,000 Victorians are waiting for planned surgery, while over 10,000 patients spent more than 24 hours in emergency departments in the past year.

Wilson's proposal to reduce surgery waiting lists by purchasing public and private capacity would further direct public funds into private healthcare. Neither leader explained how their promises could be reconciled with the cuts they were simultaneously advocating.

The leaders also competed over expanding police powers and imprisonment. Carroll boasted of "less bail and more jail" and promoted mandatory youth detention. Wilson promised tougher bail and sentencing laws. Both embraced the right-wing hysteria over youth crime while ignoring the social crisis confronting young people.

The only significant reference to the wars raging internationally came in a discussion of how best to restrict mass opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza, which has been

© World Socialist Web Site

supported by Labor and the Liberals.

Wilson proposed a permit system for demonstrations, while Carroll insisted that police already possessed extensive powers to restrict protests. Their differences concerned the methods of repression, not the legitimacy of suppressing opposition.

One Nation's Warren Pickering sought to exploit hostility to the major parties by posing as an anti-establishment outsider.

His own statements exposed the character of this supposed alternative. One Nation, which has received prominent backing from mining billionaire Gina Rinehart, advances policies directed towards the interests of big business.

Pickering denounced Labor's "fiscal illiteracy," advocated lower business taxes and pledged to remove two regulations for every new one introduced. Behind the populist denunciations of the political establishment was a demand to free corporations from restrictions and reduce their tax burden, while imposing fiscal restraint on public spending.

At the same time, Pickering blamed immigrants for economic and social problems and demanded more imprisonment. "I don't give a damn if our prisons are full," he declared. Pickering had nothing to offer workers confronting soaring living costs and deteriorating services, but demanded greater freedom for business and expanded powers of state repression.

Greens leader Ellen Sandell spent much of the debate denouncing the other parties as representatives of big business, criticising their corporate donations and advocating higher taxes on banks and major companies.

Yet her conclusion pointed towards collaboration with the very establishment she had denounced. Sandell left open negotiations with Labor over a minority government. The Greens have repeatedly entered parliamentary arrangements with Labor. Their perspective offers no break from the parliamentary establishment responsible for the attacks on workers.

Popular disaffection emerged in occasional questions from the audience. One man described waiting six years for medical treatment. Another asked why Labor should be trusted to resolve problems it had failed to address after 12 years in government.

An audience member named Billy expressed widespread distrust: "Who can you trust? They're all in it for themselves." "It's not going to be fixed with a slogan," he added. "People want to see change. It's an experience they want to see, not have lip service paid to."

The debate took place amid an increasingly desperate Labor election campaign, with mounting hostility to the government and bitter internal recriminations.

The *Australian* reported that senior figures from Labor's Left and Right factions had turned on Carroll, with one declaring that he had been "completely beaten." Labor MPs were reportedly discussing the party's leadership after the election.

Just 7 percent of the debate's 100 undecided audience members selected Carroll as the best-performing leader, a further indication of Labor's difficulties, although not a representative opinion poll.

The turmoil reflects a crisis rooted in Labor's record of austerity and decades-long attacks on the working class, not simply the performance of its leader. Nor is this merely a Victorian phenomenon. Federally, the Albanese government is cutting essential services, including the NDIS, while committing hundreds of billions of dollars to military spending and preparations for US-led war against China.

The breakdown of the traditional two-party system, reflected in One Nation's rise and growing political fragmentation, is an expression of this broader crisis.

The debate exposed the absence of any real differences in policy between the establishment parties. Labor is already imposing austerity, the Liberals are committed to the same agenda, One Nation advances pro-business and authoritarian policies, and the Greens offer to sustain Labor in office.

Whoever forms the next government will face demands from big business for sweeping cuts. Implementing this program will intensify the social anger and opposition already undermining the major parties.

The critical question is the development of an independent socialist alternative.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in the Northern Metropolitan Region on a socialist and internationalist program against austerity and war.

The SEP fights for the independent political mobilisation of the working class, including through rank-and-file committees, to defend jobs, wages and essential services. These struggles must be linked to the fight against militarism and war and for a workers' government that places the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

Vote for the SEP candidates! Join its campaign to build the socialist movement! Attend the SEP's final election meeting this Sunday, November 22, at 2:30 p.m., at the Djerring Flemington Hub in Flemington or via Zoom. The meeting will address the burning political issues excluded from the leaders' debate. Register now!

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site