

Australia: Liberals hold power in NSW election

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Premier Mike Baird and his Liberal and National Party Coalition retained government in Saturday's election in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, despite losing support and at least 16 seats in the 93-seat parliament. At present, the Liberals are expected to win 37 seats and the Nationals 16, giving them a clear majority of 53. The opposition Labor Party is predicted to win 34, the Greens four, while two independents were re-elected.

Labor failed to gain anywhere near the support it would need to take back government. While there were significant swings back to Labor in working class areas, it only won the vote of 34.4 percent of the electorate—its second lowest margin since 1907. In 2011, Labor's vote plunged to just 25.5 percent.

The defeat of the corruption-mired 16-year Labor government in 2011 was one of the largest electoral defeats in Australian history. Labor had hoped to regain power on the back of opposition to the austerity policies of the federal Coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, as well as a union-financed campaign against Baird's plans to privatise the electricity distribution network—dubbed the “poles and wires.” The Coalition went to the election pledging that the sell-off would reap up to \$20 billion to fund a range of road, rail and other infrastructure projects being demanded by Sydney-based corporations.

In the final weeks of campaigning, the unions, and Labor's recently installed leader Luke Foley, turned to outright xenophobia, broadcasting racist-tinged accusations that Baird intended to sell the electricity assets to a state-owned Chinese corporation.

While hostility to Abbott and the anti-privatisation campaign had an impact, the sheer scale of the Liberals' 2011 victory became a factor in their survival. Another element was the efforts by Baird, a

47-year-old devout Christian and former investment banker, to distance the NSW Liberals from the Abbott government. He publicly opposed its cuts to health and education funding for the states, while Abbott was effectively banned from making appearances at state campaign events.

Since Baird was installed as premier in April 2014, following the resignation of Barry O'Farrell after a minor scandal, the mass media has portrayed him as a hard-working and honest “man of the people,” who is attempting to grapple with the immense social and infrastructure crisis that wracks Sydney and much of regional NSW. The Liberal Party campaign played to this spin in an effort to stem as much as possible a voter backlash.

Liberal governments that were more closely identified with Abbott suffered far larger swings against them and were thrown out in Victoria last November and in Queensland in January.

Labor regained seven of the suburban Sydney working class seats it lost in 2011, but failed to win several others it had expected when the campaign began. Another six of the seats Labor regained were in the Central Coast and Hunter Valley, where the Liberal Party members of parliament were compelled to resign from the government after being investigated by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

The Greens won four seats for the first time, but increased their state-wide vote by just 0.1 percent, to 10.4 percent. The Greens were elected in two gentrified inner Sydney electorates, Newtown and Balmain. They are also expected to win the regional seats of Ballina and Lismore in northern NSW from the National Party. In both areas, the Greens appealed to and benefited from the substantial local opposition to coal seam gas mining developments, which were initiated under the

former Labor government and suspended by the Coalition.

The Greens have emerged as the political representative of a distinct privileged middle class and upper middle class stratum. As a rule, the lower the socio-economic demographics of an electorate, the lower the vote for the Greens. In most working class areas, it is no higher than 7 percent, compared with 14 percent in the wealthy Liberal electorate of North Shore, 37 percent in Balmain and 46.4 percent in the middle-class Green stronghold of Newtown.

The final results for the upper house of the state parliament, the 42-seat Legislative Council, will not be known for several days. Twenty-one seats were up for election. It appears possible that the Liberals and National will win at least 9 and possibly 10, in addition to 11 they hold that were not up for re-election. The right-wing Christian Democratic Party, which holds one seat and appears likely to win a second, has already signalled its willingness to provide Baird with the majority he will need to push through his legislation.

Claiming victory on Saturday night, Baird declared his re-election was a mandate to proceed rapidly with his privatisation agenda. His assertions have been endorsed by former Labor Premier Bob Carr and other Labor figures that pushed through the partial privatisation of the electricity network during their time in government.

At the national level, the Liberal victory in NSW has been lauded. The *Australian* editorial declared today: “Winning support for reform can be achieved if a compelling case is made. Mr Baird explained his policy and articulated the benefits to voters. This is a lesson for all politicians, including Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey.”

The *Australian* comment, which was widely repeated elsewhere, points to the prospect of further leadership tensions in the federal government, under conditions where Abbott and Hockey have been criticised for their inability to “explain” the reasons for the austerity it brought down last May.

In reality, it is not the lack of explanations, but the social consequences of austerity that have provoked the hostility toward Abbott. Baird’s government is no less on a collision course with the working class as it attempts, alongside the federal government and other states, to slash public spending. It will also be presiding

over growing job destruction as the global economic slump drags Australia into recession. Exit polls recorded that the major concerns of voters were the crisis of the public health and education systems and the prospect of unemployment.

Overall, the election was marked by unprecedented disdain for official politics and disaffection with the parliamentary process as a whole. At polling booths, there was little public display of enthusiasm for any party or candidate.

At the time of writing, and with some pre-poll votes still to be counted, the votes for the four candidates of the Socialist Equality Party were: James Cogan in Summer Hill, 210 (0.58 percent); Carolyn Kennett in Penrith, 170 (0.41 percent); Oscar Grenfell in Bankstown, 387 (1.11 percent); and Noel Holt in Wyong, 291 (0.86 percent).

These 1,058 votes were consciously won for a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary perspective in the face of virtual complete media censorship of the SEP campaign and the anti-democratic electoral laws.

Due to the onerous requirements for political party status in NSW, the SEP is not registered in the state, so its name did not appear on the ballot paper next to the candidates. The NSW Electoral Commission even refused to allow the SEP’s election statement—which was the principal means by which the party introduced voters to its program—to be displayed and distributed at polling booths. The Electoral Commission justified its ruling on the grounds that because the SEP is not registered, the statement could not state the SEP was “standing” in the elections or that there were “SEP candidates.”

Over the weeks ahead, the SEP will conduct campaigns and hold meetings in the four electorates where it stood and provide workers and youth who voted for its candidates with information on how to join the party.



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