

Poll underscores deepening crisis of Australian Labor government

Oscar Grenfell
16 October 2024

A Newspoll published by the *Australian* newspaper at the beginning of the week showed the Labor government trailing the opposition Liberal-National Coalition on a two-party preferred basis for the first time since the May 2022 election.

Polling is notoriously unreliable. Amid the current global political turmoil, elections have repeatedly defied the polls and surprised official pundits. The margins between Labor and the Coalition in the latest Newspoll, moreover, are wafer-thin.

The Newspoll is nevertheless significant as another marker of the deep-going crisis of the Labor government and the entire political establishment. With an election due by May at the latest, the Labor administration faces mass hostility because of its pro-business and pro-war program. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has repeatedly touted the fact that he has not previously lost a Newspoll, as a benchmark of purported support.

Despite the crisis of the government, the polling shows only marginal gains for the Coalition, whose far-right leader Peter Dutton remains a widely reviled figure.

According to the polling, Labor's primary vote remains at 31 percent. That is even lower than its 2022 election result of 32.6 percent, which was the smallest primary vote for Labor since the 1930s. The Coalition's primary vote has not shifted over several polls and sits at roughly 38 percent.

The shift in the two-party preferred, with the Coalition at 51 percent and Labor at 49 percent, was the result of a slight uptick in the vote for the far-right One Nation party. The two-party preferred factors in preferences, with those of One Nation and other right-wing outfits calculated to go to the Coalition.

Despite this, if the polling figures were replicated on election day, the Coalition would likely not be able to form a government. Instead, there would probably be a hung parliament, with Labor to establish a minority government.

The prospect of a minority government, dependent on independents and other crossbenchers, has been decried as a disastrous scenario in the financial press, because it could

obstruct the agenda of sharp austerity and escalating militarism.

The approval ratings for Albanese and Dutton again pointed to mass hostility to the official parties. Albanese's net negative approval rating was minus 14, the lowest level since he became prime minister. His disapproval rating is 54 percent compared with 52 percent for Dutton.

There are several interrelated factors driving the political crisis.

The social crisis is central. Amid the surge in cost-of-living over recent years, the Labor government, backed by the Coalition, has inflicted a historic assault on working-class living standards.

Labor's signature economic policy, the passage of the Coalition's rejigged Stage Three tax cuts, overwhelmingly benefits the wealthy. Labor has rejected calls for increases to the sub-poverty level unemployment benefits as well as relief for workers hit by soaring mortgages and rental costs, as well as price hikes for all other essentials.

Labor's housing policies at the state and federal levels have been paltry and have all been geared towards ensuring that the property bubble continues. Labor administrations in New South Wales and Victoria, the country's most populous states, are proceeding with the destruction of what remains of public housing stock.

The results for masses of ordinary people have been dire. Per capita gross domestic product has fallen for the past six quarters in a row, meaning a real recession for the population. Since 2019, real wages have fallen by 4.8 percent, a trend that continues and is enforced by the Labor administrations and their partners in the corporatised trade union bureaucracy. That is one of the sharpest reversals in an advanced OECD economy.

Charity group Anglicare's 2024 Rental Affordability Snapshot, based on a comparison between incomes and rental listings over a weekend in March, bluntly began: "The worst it has ever been. That is the only way to describe the current state of rental affordability in Australia."

To be deemed "affordable," a rental had to cost less than

30 percent of income. Just 0.6 percent were affordable for a person earning a full-time minimum wage. Three rentals out of more than 45,000 were affordable for a person on the Jobseeker unemployment payment, all of them in share houses.

In a supplementary report released yesterday, the charity spotlighted the dire situation facing essential workers. For instance, “976 rentals (2.2 percent) were affordable for an ambulance worker” and “629 rentals (1.4 percent) were affordable for a nurse.” That extended to other key industries, with 389 rentals (0.9 percent) deemed affordable for the average construction worker.

For home buyers, the situation is equally dire. Recent research by Roy Morgan found that 29.5 percent of mortgage holders were at risk of mortgage stress in the three months to August. That is largely a result of 13 interest rate rises by the Reserve Bank of Australia, aimed at slowing the economy to suppress any wages push by workers.

The social crisis is having far-reaching and historic consequences. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures this week showed the country’s birth rate for 2023 was the lowest level in history, at 1.5 babies per woman. Experts have stated that is substantially a result of the economic hardship facing ordinary people.

The release of the Newspoll also coincided with two anniversaries, linked to the Labor government’s crisis.

Last week marked a year of Israel’s genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza. Labor has backed the Zionist regime politically, diplomatically and militarily, as it has murdered as many as 200,000 Palestinians. Labor has responded to the anniversary by endorsing Israel’s onslaught against Lebanon and the threats of conflict with Iran, including by announcing next sanctions on the latter this week. It has spearheaded an intensified crackdown on mass opposition, including with violent arrests of protesters at university campuses and threats to ban all anti-genocide demonstrations.

That drive, which has shocked broad layers of the population, is part of the broader support of Labor for imperialist militarism. This week, Labor announced that it would dispatch 49 Abrams military tanks to the fascist regime in Ukraine. That is direct support for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, which threatens a nuclear catastrophe.

Labor is completing Australia’s militarisation, to play a central role in another front of the developing global war: the US plans for conflict with China. That includes the AUKUS program to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, whose \$369 million price tag shocked masses of people, the expansion of strike capabilities across all branches of the military and the transformation of swathes of the continent,

especially the north and west, into launch sites for aggressive operations throughout the Indo-Pacific.

The other anniversary, on October 14, marked a year since the defeat of Labor’s referendum to enshrine an Indigenous Voice to parliament in the Constitution. That was intended to exploit widespread sympathy of the dire plight of Aboriginal people, and to put a progressive gloss on the government’s agenda of war and austerity.

The Voice aimed to integrate even further into the corridors of power a right-wing Indigenous elite. They were to play an even greater role in justifying the war drive and the accompanying onslaught on social conditions. Masses of people, however, especially in working-class areas, smelt a rat and did not believe that the government or another advisory body would improve the lot of oppressed Indigenous people or anyone else.

That sentiment was strengthened in the final week of the campaign, as Labor simultaneously promoted the Voice and aggressively supported the beginning of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

On all vital social metrics, the situation facing ordinary Indigenous people has worsened since the referendum, as a result above all of Labor’s austerity. The leading Indigenous proponents of the Voice, meanwhile, have showcased their reactionary politics, with several explicitly supporting the genocide and others remaining silent as they pursue their lucrative careers.

It could be said that Labor has not recovered from the Voice defeat. But even more fundamental is the collapse of its former base of support in the working class, a process that has developed over decades as Labor has implemented the dictates of the financial elite for an unending assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

There is no question that the political crisis will deepen. But the decisive issue is the intervention of the working class, to advance its own independent interests. That means taking up the fight for a socialist and revolutionary perspective, against the entire political establishment and capitalism itself, which offers a future only of social misery, war and barbarism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact