

Right-wing Australian government re-elected as voters turn against Labor

By Oscar Grenfell
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Saturday's Australian federal election has resulted in a devastating defeat for the Labor Party opposition and the return to office of the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

With vote-counting continuing and a handful of seats yet to be decided, it appears that Morrison will be able to form government with a slim majority of one or two seats in the House of Representatives, the lower house of parliament. Independents and right-wing populists are likely to hold the balance of power in the Senate, the upper house.

The result is a debacle for Labor. Amid widespread hostility to the Coalition, it was widely predicted that the election would result in a landslide Labor victory.

Within hours of polling closing, however, Labor's Bill Shorten had conceded defeat and stood down as party leader. Labor is now in the grips of intense factional wrangling, with prominent MPs Anthony Albanese and Chris Bowen both contesting the leadership.

After decades of Labor governments imposing the dictates of big business and the banks, the party was not able to make any credible appeal to workers and young people. They did not believe Labor's claims that it would promote "fairness," or that its bogus campaign promises would, even if implemented, address widespread concerns over jobs, wages and social services.

Discussion of the major issues facing ordinary people, including the slowdown of the Australian economy, the mounting danger of war and the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, was suppressed.

Broad layers of the population viewed the entire election with disgust. Last week, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) election analyst Antony Green commented: "I've never seen an electorate which is quite so disengaged with the whole process."

A record five million voters, around 25 percent, cast a ballot before election day, in a signal of their disinterest

and hostility to the entire official charade.

The primary vote for both major parties declined. Labor's vote in House of Representatives seats across the country fell by around one percent, to just below 34 percent of the total. The party's primary vote is currently the second lowest since 1933. The Coalition's primary total declined by roughly 0.6 percent, to 41.4 percent.

Almost 25 percent of the electorate registered their hostility to Labor and the Coalition, by casting a ballot for minor parties, including the Greens, and independents.

The swings against Labor were greatest in working class suburbs in the major cities, and in regional areas, where the issues of jobs, a soaring cost of living and growing poverty are most acute.

The falls were particularly sharp in Queensland, where Labor has been reduced to a rump. The party's primary vote fell to just over 27 percent. Labor failed to win any marginal seats, and will likely hold just five electorates across the state, out of 30.

In the seat of Herbert, which encompasses Townsville and other parts of northern Queensland, for instance, there was an 8.4 percent swing to the Liberals. The area has an official unemployment rate of 9.8 percent, more than twice the national average. In March, the *Australian Financial Review* dubbed it "ground zero" in Labor's attempts to posture as a party that would boost jobs and improve wages.

Similar declines in Labor's vote were registered in mining areas throughout northern and central Queensland. The Coalition, and right-wing populists such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation and Clive Palmer's United Australia Party, exploited fears that a Greens-backed Labor government would adopt policies, on the pretext of combating climate change, that would impact on mining jobs.

Labor's vote declined in western Sydney, where it will likely lose the seats of Lindsay and Macquarie. Sharp

falls were also registered in safe Labor seats that the party has held for decades, amid growing anger over a deepening social crisis.

In Victoria, Labor's vote increased by 1.7 percent. It failed, however, to make any gains in working class areas, or in marginal seats that it had been targeting. Labor picked up the electorates of Corangamite and Dunkley, but only thanks to a 2016 redistribution of electoral boundaries.

The largest swings to Labor were in the most affluent Melbourne electorates, including Kooyong, which are centres of the upper middle-class and the rich.

In Tasmania, Labor lost the electorates of Bass and Braddon, which both include areas of growing social distress, after swings of around five percent. The party similarly failed to make any gains in the states of South Australia and Western Australia.

The results demonstrate that Labor is rightly viewed as a party of big business and the wealthy elites, that has nothing to offer the working class.

A central feature of the election campaign was the promotion by the media and political establishment of right-wing populists, including Palmer and Hanson. Both made demagogic appeals based on anti-immigrant chauvinism and a denunciation of the major parties.

After a huge and expensive advertising blitz, the newly formed United Australia Party of the billionaire Palmer picked up 3.4 percent of the primary vote across the country. One Nation received 1.7 percent. The two parties, and a plethora of smaller right-wing organisations, targeted regional and working-class areas, in a bid to exploit the social crisis created by Labor and Coalition governments.

Neither picked up any seats, making clear that they do not have mass support. However, their promotion and prominence in the election is a warning of the growing threat posed by the emergence of far-right movements.

Across the country, the Greens vote declined by 0.2 percent. Its votes were highest in the affluent areas that it targeted, including the seat of Melbourne, which was retained by the only sitting member Adam Bandt.

The Greens claims to represent a "progressive" alternative to the major parties are widely discredited. The Greens have dispensed with any, even nominal, opposition to war and have participated in pro-business coalition governments with Labor and the Liberal-Nationals. They are widely regarded as a party of the affluent inner-city, upper middle-class.

The Victorian Socialists, an unprincipled coalition of

pseudo-left organisations, won some support in the seats they contested, including almost 10 percent at two of the poorest booths in the working-class Melbourne electorate of Broadmeadows.

While falsely exploiting growing support for socialism, the Victorian Socialists promoted the fraud that a Greens-backed Labor government committed to the dictates of big business and to participating in US-led wars, would be a "lesser-evil."

The Socialist Equality Party won important support for a genuine socialist alternative among workers, students and young people.

With vote-counting incomplete, SEP candidates in the four House of Representatives seats where the party stood each received more than 500 votes. In the New South Wales Senate, over 1,000 workers and youth voted for the SEP. In Victoria, the figure is more than 5,000.

The election result underscores the danger posed by the absence of a mass movement advancing the independent interests of the working class. While broad sections of the population sought to register their hostility to all the official parties, the result is a far-right Morrison government, committed to tax cuts for the wealthy and to participating in US imperialism's plans for war with China.

Morrison is an extreme right-wing figure, associated with the persecution of refugees. He was installed as prime minister in a political coup last August aimed at transforming the Liberal Party into a Trump-style movement based on populist appeals and extreme right-wing nationalism.

This underscores the urgency of building a mass socialist movement aimed at establishing a workers' government and reorganising society in the interests of social need, not private profit. That is the perspective for which the SEP fought in the election and which must now be built as the revolutionary leadership of such a movement.

To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>