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Australian Elections: Winning Politics of Climate Change

By Dr Anne-Marie Schleich

SYNOPSIS

Australia's election results clearly reflect voters desire for political change. The strong showing of Independent and Green candidates indicate pressure for more decisive climate action which was missing under the previous Morrison administration. The new Labor government's stronger environmental commitment could appease neighbouring Pacific island countries which are under threat of rising sea levels.



The Victor: Labor leader Anthony Albanese rejoicing in his victory in Australia's recent elections. He signals a stronger pro-climate change posture. credit: Sydney Morning Herald photo

COMMENTARY

THE NEW Australian Parliament will see more female parliamentarians, more environmentalists and a landscape that is ethnically more diverse than before. Unlike in 2019, the pollsters did not get it wrong this time when they forecast a win for the Australian Labor Party after nine years in opposition. However, they did not predict the landslide defeat which the Liberal Party suffered in the House of Representatives.

Traditionally safe inner-city Liberal Party seats in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth went either to Labor or to new independent grassroots candidates, the so-called Teals. The Independents win of 10 seats was dubbed “the big Teal Steal”. Even the normally not popular Greens had a historic win of three seats with 11.8 % of the popular vote and additional seats in the Senate, the Upper House. (*preliminary results: Labor: 75 seats, Liberal/National coalition: 59, Independents: 10, Greens; 3*)

Anti-China Belligerence Backfired

In spite of both big parties having similar foreign policy positions on Australia’s relations with China, outgoing Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his defence minister Peter Dutton tried to paint Labor’s Leader Anthony Albanese as weak on China. This old Liberal Party election strategy, however, backfired when a surprise China-Solomon Islands security pact was leaked in the middle of the election campaign.

The government’s belligerent anti-China rhetoric also alienated voters with Chinese ethnic background (1.2 million of Australia’s population). A number of electorates with strong Chinese minorities were thus lost by the Liberals.

Despite stints as a former minister and Leader of the Opposition, Albanese’s personality image was considered pale, and he also made a few gaffes at the start of the campaign. Labor’s campaign was predominantly focused on cost of living and fair wage topics and government mistakes.

Teal candidates, all of them female professionals, mainly ran on environmental and good governance platforms, having received a strong backing from their local communities and some from fundraising platform Climate 200. They also supported a national anti-corruption commission which Labor had promised to establish but PM Morrison was strongly against.

Labor’s Stronger Climate Action Package

Teals profited from a widespread voter dislike of Morrison’s “bulldozer” personality and perceptions that he mishandled the floods this year and the devastating bushfires in 2019, both caused by climate change. Morrison had also come under attack for his extremely weak 2030 emissions reduction target of 26% to 28% compared with 2005 levels.

Labor carefully avoided to alienate conservative voters with a strong climate action package even though it pledged somewhat more ambitious emission targets (43% by 2030, net zero by 2050) than the Morrison government. Teals also zoomed in on

female voters' unhappiness with the Governments mishandling of sexual assault complaints in Parliament and government offices.

In the end, moderate, policy focused and charismatic Teal candidates seem to have appealed more to dissatisfied urban and suburban Liberal Party voters who wanted a change, especially more decisive climate action, but did not want to switch to Labor or the Greens. This trend resulted in Saturday's "election earthquake", commented former Liberal PM Malcolm Turnbull.

With a strong Teal and Greens opposition, one can expect increased pressure on the new Government for more decisive climate action. Already, the newly-sworn in Prime Minister Albanese signalled a climate policy change: "We have an opportunity now to end the climate wars in Australia."

He pledged to make Australia a "renewable energy superpower" and promised during the recent Quad meeting in Japan, that his government "will take ambitious action on climate change". Albanese agreed to cooperate with the three Quad partners on clean energy.

Some green mega projects are already underway: within the framework of a new Green Economy Agreement, Australia and Singapore are working on a solar power project that aims to provide green energy to Singapore through an undersea cable from Darwin. And Germany and Australia last year entered a partnership to develop a hydrogen industry.

Climate Change: Resetting Ties with the Pacific Family

Albanese said at the Quad meeting: "We will act in recognition that climate change is the main economic and security challenge for Pacific island countries." Foreign Minister Penny Wong acknowledged that the new Australian government "knows that nothing is more central to the security and wellbeing of the Pacific than climate change".

This is a first step for resetting Australia's relations with the so-called Pacific family. Pacific nations — faced with an existential threat of rising sea levels — severely criticised the Morrison government for its lack of climate action and adherence to coal powered plants. They had long been driving global progress to combat climate change.

Australia's influence among the Pacific community had weakened because of its climate reluctant position in international climate negotiations and within the regional Pacific Islands Forum. The upcoming climate change COP27 in Egypt this November will be a test for the Albanese government's climate resolve.

The strong showing of the Teals and the Greens might not only have an influence on more decisive environment and climate policies but also potentially change the traditional Australian political landscape where for decades two major political parties and mainly male politicians dominated the political arena.

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