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SPECIAL EDITION***eNews* examines the issues as Victorian
Labor heads for a second term*Victoria goes
to the Polls*

Victorians go the polls on Saturday with every major pollster predicting a landslide win for the Bracks State Labor Government.

The results appear to rest heavily on the high and statewide personal approval rating of the Premier, Steve Bracks.

Polling shows Labor winning between 57% and 61% of the vote after preferences – a huge lead over the Liberals at between 39% and 43%.

The result is fairly consistent across the State. Even the lowest poll result of 57%, returned in regional areas, is very comfortable for Labor.

No-contest expectations can lead to unexpected voter behaviour. In 1999 the Liberal Government had a similar expectation, leading a large number of supporters to lodge a protest. The result was a very close result from which Labor was able to form Government.

This time Premier Bracks is in a better position to stave off a late change.

The big lead more than eclipses predictions that preferences of voters supporting Greens candidates would be important.

At the beginning of the campaign the Greens were rated as polling 12%, but this has since slipped to 10% and most recently 7% as the campaign goes on.

With the decline of the Democrats and a electorate comfortable with making a protest against a safe government, results below 10% would be a poor outcome for the Greens.

The Greens will, however, certainly return their highest ever Statewide vote. Their increased share of the minor party vote will be greatly boosted by running candidates in every electorate.

Voters who choose Green candidates have a consistent track-record – about 75% preference the ALP. In safe Liberal seats the Labor share of preferences is a little lower.

This indicates that most Green voters have a strong ranking between Liberal and Labor in casting preferences. This in turn means that 'how-to-vote' requests by Greens campaigners have little effect.

Preferences can sometimes be important to a seat outcome, but preference deals between parties - which are only recommendations to voters - are less significant.

Greens tacticians would find it almost impossible to call on supporters to prefer a Liberal or National candidate, and have even less chance of delivering such a result based on a deal.

In addition, Labor is well aware that they get most of these preferences through making token pro-environment decisions, not through formal preference deals.

A study of the 2001 federal election results found that not one House of Representatives electorate result was affected by a preference deal with the Greens.

Early campaign attacks on Goolongook, Otways industry



Labor sent a carefully targeted message to environment sensitivities by attacking the forest industry in the first few days of the campaign.

The Government announced a new policy that would break Regional Forest Agreement obligations by ending wood supplies from forests in the Otways region, in the south-west of the State.

The area is a prime holiday location for city residents.

The decision comes only a few weeks after a similar back-flip on the Regional Forest Agreement covering the Goolongook area in Gippsland. Despite three years of commitment to controlling often violent and dangerous green protest activities in the harvesting zone, the Government terminated timber activities without notice in the lead-up to the election.

The announcements will lock in the traditional preference support Labor receives from Green voters, without obliging the ALP to deal further with the Greens.

Industry disappointed at Government backflips



The Victorian forest industry is deeply disappointed at the policy backflips launched by the Bracks Government at the start of the campaign.

But industry leader Graeme Gooding, Executive Director of the Victorian Association of Forest Industries, said that the industry would hold the Government accountable to its RFA obligations.

“Decisions like the denial of established timber supplies in the Otways have big consequences. The RFA’s were a contract, and businesses made investment decisions based on them,” said Mr Gooding.

“The Government has tried to placate all sides, claiming that alternative timber supplies can be substituted from plantations yet the most recent Federal Government studies show no hardwood sawlog plantations can be made available for 25 years or more.”

“This decision seems to have been made based on some wrong advice about the suitability of existing blue gum plantations. We are yet to be told how the alternative supplies would be provided.”

“Investment in Victoria cannot be sustained if the Government is one which breaks its word and reneges on its contracts.”

Executive Director of the National Association of Forest Industries said that the Victorian Government has dragged its feet deliberately on enacting legislation to back the Agreements and secure investment confidence.

“The federal political parties – both Liberal and Labor

– agreed to create confidence by legislating for the security of their part in the Regional Forest Agreements,” she said.

“So did Tasmania, also in a bipartisan way.”

“But despite legislation being on the table during 2002, the Bracks Government has failed to support the law to back investment security.”

She commended the Liberal and National Parties and the Independent MLAs for supporting the legislation.

“In the new parliament, passing RFA laws will be one of the first tests of good faith for the next government.”

Government’s Obligations under Forest Agreements



Government decisions on the Otways and Goolongook forests are in breach of the harvesting zones agreed to in a series of State Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs).

The Agreements – the basis for Australia’s Federal-State national forest policy – commit States to both conservation and production outcomes.

Under the RFA agreements – which have been developed across Australia since 1997 – the nation’s forest conservation has risen to among the strongest in the world.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature sets a well-respected benchmark of 20% of forest land area for forest protection. Australia exceeds the benchmark in every State.

In regard to old-growth forests, the proportion conserved in parks and reserves is over 60% across Australia, including WA (100%), Central Victoria (84%), Tasmania (68%), SE NSW (68%) and East Victoria (64%).

The RFAs also set out which areas of forest are available for wood production. These agreements relieved uncertainty in the timber economy, and allowed for ongoing investment decisions with much less risk of changes in political policy.

The sudden dumping of RFA obligations will have disastrous economic effects.

Despite the strong bipartisanship at a national level, both the Liberal and Labor parties in Western Australia dumped the WA RFA suddenly during the 2001 State election campaign.

The Labor Party won the election, and promised to introduce business exit and worker support policies. The Victorian ALP is promising similar policies in the current election.

But the WA Government has failed for over a year to settle the policy and implement the promised assistance package. Timber workers and businesses in that State have endured delay, uncertainty and social dislocation with no conclusion in sight.

The same prospect could await Victorian timber communities

ALP and Unions in serious policy split



The subterranean tensions between the ALP and the union movement have troubled the federal ALP for a year.

In October they dramatically cost the party one of its safest federal seats. In the Cunningham by-election a bizarre combination of a union split from the ALP, a candidate imposed by Party HQ, and the Liberals's decision not to run combined to boost the Green candidate to a narrow win.

Now those same tensions have split traditional unions away from the ALP during the Victorian election campaign.

In one inner-Melbourne seat an Independent – Kevin Chamberlin – is running in circumstances quite similar to Woolongong's surprise result.

The presence of Liberal candidate makes it almost impossible for the Green candidate to win, but a strong run by the Independent could beat Labor.

More dramatically, the Forestry Division of the CFMEU is outraged at Government announcements which directly contradict Party policy adopted only a few months ago.

The ALP State Labor Party Conference this year re-affirmed support for the timber industry and the Regional Forest Agreements, firmly rejecting proposals from the party's environmental wing.

But announcements made by Labor in the first few days of the campaign directly contradicted these policy positions.

Labor's forest policy statement included a breach of the RFA in the Otways region, and an attack on renewable alternative energy sources being developed in Gippsland.

A CFMEU member – Brad Platschinda – is mounting an independent run in the ALP-held seat of Morwell. In the strong pro-government climate, a swing against the sitting member would affirm the underlying anger of significant groups in the Party and the Electorate.

Victorian Government policies weak on forestry



The **ALP policy statement on forestry** acknowledges the very extensive conservation reserves in the State's Forests, much of it covered by the Regional Forest Agreements.

The Government also puts the best gloss it can on the disaster covered over by its *Our Forests, Our Future* (OFOF) package earlier this year.

Consisting of a dramatic reduction of timber availability across the State, even the admitted basis for the OFOF policy – new assessments suggesting that the agreed timber harvesting zones have less timber in them than originally believed – represents a major administrative fiasco, if not an outright deception.

The policy's name has been parodied within the industry as *Oh F***, Our Fault*.

Labor's new policy initiatives for this election are all negatives for the industry.

Up front was the direct decision to terminate timber supplies in the Otways forest zone by 2008.

Another initiative is the buy-out of operators in the Wombat region, ending the established industry there.

Two unexpected surprises were a proposed ban on making use of wood waste for energy generation and possibly for charcoal production for silicon manufacturing.

The green movement has campaigned aggressively against the idea that waste wood materials be used to generate electricity, substituting for fossil-fuel energy from the power grid.

Green interest groups avoid criticism of the obvious anti-environmental effect of their position by claiming that the energy proposals would lead to more harvesting.

In fact, applications for renewable energy status have been based on guarantees only to use waste material.

Even more significant is the fact that the cost (and energy consumption) of harvesting cannot possibly make electricity generation viable as a stand-alone resource use.

Despite these facts, the NSW Government recently signaled to the green movement that it would outlaw electricity generation from public forest resources in the State.

Carbon processing is another potential use for waste materials. There is demand for charcoal (carbon) for use in manufacturing silicon. An Australian silicon industry would replace current imports.

The green arguments against this proposal are similar to those against renewable energy – scare campaigns about increased harvesting.

One interesting aspect of the ALP package is that it contradicts the decisions made at the ALP State Conference mid-year.

The CFMEU have been outraged at the capacity of campaign decisions to override the Party policy platform.

The situation may add to the complex internal politics of the ALP, where members are demanding an increasing respect be given to views of the membership as expressed through party processes.

Liberal policy supports RFAs and sustainability



The **Liberal policy statement on the environment** drew heavily on the policy foundations laid down by the Regional Forest Agreements.

There were numerous references to the concept of a sustainable industry, with environmental protection being balanced by an agreed structure for timber production in the State.

The party's forest policy statement criticised the Government's unexpected decisions during 2002, including

the recent decision to terminate the timber industry at Goolongook.

The Liberals promise to renew the proposal for legislation to give resource security to the RFA arrangements.

A proposal to “minimise” the extent of old-growth harvesting is unwelcome, and comes against a background of over 60 % of Victorian old-growth being conserved already.

The Liberals promise to ban clearfelling in the Wombat forest is also unwelcome. There is no logical reason for the decision, which is a nod to sensitivities created by green opposition.

Timber unions are adamantly against the alternative – ‘selective logging’ – on the ground of greatly increased risks of injury to workers.

The Liberals are also the first party to speak in terms of increasing the stock of old-growth forest.

Such an increase will occur naturally as the cyclical aging of mature forests in reserves easily outstrips the very low rate of harvesting in older forests.

The Liberal promise to seek state-wide certification against the new Australian Forestry Standard, if carried out, would confirm many of the state’s sustainability credentials and eventually eliminate any practices which fell short of the Standard.

Clever policy tactics by the Greens in Victoria



The Greens have had some success early in the campaign convincing the major parties – or the Government, at least – that their preferences are so vital that the future of Government depends upon it.

In fact, Greens have traditionally had their best support – above 10% – only in safe Liberal or safe Labor seats in inner-city areas.

The great majority of Green votes have no outcome on the fate of governments at all.

In marginal seats, Green support is noticeably lower.

This may reflect a trend that voters vote for protest parties when they know there is no chance of altering the actual result. Voting this way “sends a message” to the safe local member without upsetting the final outcome.

The outcome in the recent by-election in Woolongong was in large part a protest of this kind, aided by the absence of a Liberal challenger and a deep split in the ALP.

Even after Labor started the campaign with a promise to break their Regional Forest Agreements and end wood-harvesting in the Otway regrowth forests, the Greens refused to promise their preferences to the ALP.

“This just goes to prove you can never please the Green’s political party,” said Labor’s Minister Sherryl Garbutt.

But even the much-vaunted preference deals may turn out to be of little value to the ALP.

A study into the 2001 federal election discovered that not one

of the 150 federal seats was influenced by a preference deal.

Green preferences consistently split 3–1 in favour of the ALP. Victoria has an electoral system which requires voters to fill out all their preferences, so whichever of the major parties they might otherwise have supported secures their preferences in any event.

Timber Communities hit the hustings



Few campaign teams in Victoria have been as active as the state branch of Timber Communities Australia, the grassroots group representing timber workers and families in local towns.

TCA members have thrown themselves into the campaign, with the focus on several electorates in a ring around Melbourne, and east into Gippsland.

“We need to show this Government that it has been complacent and has caused working families to suffer,” said State Co-ordinator Kersten Gentle.

“This is not the role that the Labor Party promises its supporters.”

“Every local community hears the rubbish that Labor and the Greens put up as policy. They know it is ignorant prejudice rather than real concern for the environment.

“No one believes that vague promises of assistance and so-called “business exits” will repair the devastation of local towns.

“We have heard first-hand the stories from our Western Australian members, who have waited almost two years to see if Labor’s promises materialise. They haven’t.”

Ms Gentle said that the tragedy for rural people was who to vote for. An anti-Kennett backlash is still strong in the bush, and Labor’s attacks on timber industries are just beginning to take hold.

“We look for party candidates who can act as individuals, standing up to their party if necessary. Nothing less gets out support.

“We also support all independents who will stand up for the local industries and communities.”

TCA has a statewide membership of over 3,500 in ten branches.