

Opinion polls provoke bewilderment in lead-up to Australian election

By the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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While the next Australian federal election is not due until later this year, unofficial campaigning is well underway.

For the mass media, the primary issue of concern has been a series of recent opinion polls indicating that the Howard government is set to lose office. From the start of the year, the polls have consistently shown the government to be more unpopular than at any time since it came to power in March 1996. In April, its stocks had fallen so low that Prime Minister Howard told his parliamentary colleagues they faced electoral “annihilation”, and that he had no “rabbit in the hat” to save them.

Politicians and media pundits alike have responded with perplexity and bewilderment. By their reckoning the government should be doing particularly well, given the relatively low official unemployment and inflation rates, and continuing economic growth.

The *Australian's* political editor Dennis Shanahan, for example, referred to the “conundrum [that is] confounding political analysts ... it is not just commentators who are flummoxed by the polls but the players [politicians] as well.” Health Minister Tony Abbott attacked the voters, complaining they were unreasonable: “...nothing but the best is good enough from Australian politicians and, the better it becomes, the more zealously voters reserve their right to raise their expectations”. Howard wondered out loud whether perhaps the public was simply playing a temporary joke on his government.

This inability to comprehend the popular sentiment expressed in the polls underscores the enormity of the gulf that separates the world of the ruling elite and the political and media establishment on the one hand, and the one occupied by the vast mass of the population on the other.

Opinion polls are a highly distorted reflection of political reality, but the present trend does represent a definite political shift. And it is one that goes well beyond the relative standing of the two major parties—Liberal and Labor. It reflects a far deeper sense of hostility and disgust towards official parliamentary politics as a whole.

Whatever fluctuations may occur over coming months, one thing can be definitely established: the current rise in its poll standing indicates no political resurgence for the Labor Party. If Labor wins the 2007 election it will be despite, not because of, its policies. The past eleven years of the Howard government have been marked by a degree of bipartisanship that is unprecedented in Australia's political history. And while Labor governs in every state and territory, it does so under conditions of deep dissatisfaction. Even as Labor governments were returned recently in NSW, Queensland and Victoria, majorities in each state believed they deserved to lose office.

The single most significant factor in the shift against the

government is the war in Iraq—not only the illegal invasion and occupation, the catastrophe that has ensued, the tortures at Abu Ghraib, the horrific toll on Iraqi lives and society—but the broader processes of which it is a part. Millions of ordinary people have become profoundly suspicious of the Bush administration's “war on terror” and the Howard government's embrace of it. They are aware of the lies and falsifications used by Howard to justify both aggressive wars in the Middle East and his government's assault on democratic rights at home, along with its accelerating drive to militarise Australian society.

Yet, this suspicion and hostility can find no expression within the parliamentary arena. Just as in the United States, where Bush has enjoyed the complete support of the Democratic Party for the Iraq war and the “war on terror”, so Howard has operated with the full backing of the Labor opposition. In the last federal election, held 18 months into the war, the Labor Party raised no opposition to the invasion and spent the entire campaign trying to avoid and suppress any discussion on the war. Today, while Labor leader Kevin Rudd is keen to capitalise on the obvious widespread popular opposition, his only disagreement with Howard is that, while US troops should stay, some of Australia's limited forces should be withdrawn and sent to assist the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

One indication of the extent of this opposition was the recent public outcry over the Howard government's collaboration in the detention of Australian citizen David Hicks in Guantánamo Bay. Since his capture in 2001, Hicks had been vilified as a dangerous terrorist by both Howard and the Labor Party. But by last year, public demand for his release from Guantánamo had developed to such an extent that the government was forced to engineer a deal, including his transfer to an Australian prison and his release early next year.

There is also a deep sense of disquiet over the government's failure to respond to global warming and climate change. So pronounced has this become, that Howard—who for years denied the existence of any climate problem—now suddenly claims he has the policies to solve it.

For young people in particular, the eruption of war and militarism, along with growing evidence of climate change, indicate the emergence of a global crisis and of potential global disasters for which the present political order not only has no remedies, but is directly responsible.

Social inequality

The gap between official circles and the lives of ordinary working people is nowhere more pronounced than in economic and social life. According to the official line, the economic situation has rarely been better. Growth has continued uninterrupted for 15 years, inflation remains low, the unemployment rate is the lowest in more than three decades, consumer confidence is high and there is a rising tide

of prosperity. In the words of one right-wing commentator, the working class “relieved of its chains” has bought “McMansions and speedboats.”

One does not have to penetrate too far beneath the hype to discover that the most striking feature of this “prosperity”—fuelled, to a large extent, by the boom in resource exports to China—is the growth of social inequality and a rapid rise in debt.

A small minority, at the apex of society, has become much, much wealthier. For this social layer—whose views on life and the economy find expression in the “analyses” presented by large sections of the media—things have never been so good. The stock market is at record highs and still climbing, corporate profits have grown by an annual average of 20 percent, and executive salaries are skyrocketing. The latest *Business Review Weekly* “rich list” survey revealed that the richest 200 individuals in Australia have a combined wealth of \$128.6 billion—more than 50 percent higher than the equivalent figure just two years ago.

These obscene levels of private wealth have come at the direct expense of the working class. The share of national income going to labour is just 53.8 percent, down from 56 percent in 2000. The profit share rose from less than 24 percent to nearly 28 percent over the same period. Until 2000, the profit share had never been greater than 23 percent. “To put that into context,” the *Australian* explained, “business profits are now about \$80 billion a year higher than their long-term average.”

Official unemployment figures have been kept artificially low by the explosion of low-paid casual and part-time work. More than 30 percent of all jobs are estimated to be casual, leaving millions of workers with no secure income. And those with full-time employment face increased pressures as well. According to a recent study, full-time male workers work an average of 45 hours per week, with one-third wanting to return to the eight-hour day. For many people, a significant proportion of the working week is taken up by unpaid overtime.

Official inflation figures similarly fail to reflect the realities of everyday life. Costs of living have increased in housing, transport, health, education, childcare and recreation. Housing, in particular, has become increasingly unaffordable for working families, with average mortgage repayments in two cities, Sydney and Perth, more than \$3,000 per month, leading to an explosion in “housing stress”. Household debt averages 165 percent of disposable income. In working class areas, the number of home repossessions is rapidly increasing, while bankruptcies occur at a rate nearly three times higher than a decade ago, with 30,000 people declaring themselves insolvent each year.

Hostility to the steady erosion of living conditions has found expression in overwhelming public opposition to the government’s new industrial relations package, WorkChoices, which is aimed at making further inroads into workers’ wages and conditions. Demonstrations staged before the legislation went through parliament were larger than any in Australia’s history, except for the 2003 antiwar rallies, and opposition has only intensified as WorkChoices begins to directly affect increasing numbers of workers.

The role of Labor

Given the deepening of social, economic and political

tensions throughout its period of rule, the question that needs to be answered is not why the polls are registering opposition, but why the Howard government has been able to remain in office for the past 11 years. The various media pundits—both “left” and right wing—have the answer immediately to hand. The secret of Howard’s success, they maintain, lies in his uncanny ability to understand and articulate the views of the “average” Australian. This position—a variation on the theme that every voting population gets the government it deserves—explains nothing, least of all why opposition to the government, which has broadened and deepened throughout its term of office, has been unable to find any outlet within the official political structure.

The reasons for Howard’s electoral success can be found not in the views of the so-called “average” voter—which are shifting and changing in this era of rapid economic, political, social and cultural upheaval—but in the specific political role played by the old organisations of the working class—the Labor Party and the trade union leadership.

The Howard government came to office in March 1996 on a wave of anger generated by the free market “restructuring” policies of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments. While Howard was the immediate beneficiary of this movement, his government very soon confronted it.

In his first budget, in August 1996, Howard and his treasurer, Peter Costello, launched a program of sweeping cuts to education and living standards. It provoked mass opposition, culminating in the storming of parliament house by thousands of workers. No one was more opposed to this outpouring of popular anger than the Labor and trade union leaders, who helped suppress the movement. They then resolved to do everything they could to prevent any repeat.

In the 1998 maritime dispute, which erupted over the government-backed conspiracy to sack the entire waterfront workforce, the ACTU called off industrial action and entered talks with the employers to slash hundreds of jobs, right at the point where the conflict with the government was beginning to extend to wider layers of the working class.

In his campaign for the 1998 elections, held later that year, Labor leader Kim Beazley offered no alternative to the Liberals’ savage program, famously insisting that, in order to win, he had to present a “small target”.

In the lead-up to the 2001 election, after trailing badly in the opinion polls, Howard launched a scare campaign over refugees and “boat people”, which the Labor Party fully endorsed—attempting to show it could be even more ruthless in attacking “illegals”—opening the way, once again for the Liberals’ victory.

Then in 2004, having repudiated any opposition to the invasion of Iraq and refusing to challenge the lies used to justify the war, the Labor Party cleared the way for the Liberals to conduct the election on their terms. Howard launched another scare campaign—this time on interest rates—to which the Labor Party, having no fundamental differences with the government’s economic program, could provide no answer.

And now the pattern is being repeated in the lead-up to the 2007 election. The Labor Party has completely aligned itself with the government’s “war on terror”, its aggressive, neo-colonial military interventions in East Timor and the Pacific, and its attacks on democratic rights. The plethora of “anti-terror” legislation passed by the Howard government

has been supported by Labor in the federal parliament and backed up by parallel legislation in the Labor states.

On every social issue, Rudd expresses agreement with the government's "free market" agenda, proudly describing himself as a "fiscal conservative"—in line with his role as an operative in the Queensland Goss Labor government, where he earned the nickname "Dr Death" for slashing thousands of public sector jobs.

The Labor Party agrees with Howard's tax cuts for big business and the wealthy and supports the private health rebate system, under which private companies receive multi-million dollar handouts and the health system is steadily privatised. Taking his cue from his state Labor colleagues, Rudd advocates so-called "public private partnerships" that allow major corporations and investment banks to profit from the development of schools, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure development.

Labor's much-vaunted opposition to WorkChoices is no exception. On the contrary, it is an expression of the same process.

When huge protest meetings and marches erupted against the introduction of WorkChoices last year, the trade union leadership, from the ACTU down, worked to ensure that the "campaign" was channeled, not against the Howard government, but behind the Labor Party. Only by returning a Labor government, they argued, could the legislation be overturned.

For his part, Rudd has pledged to scrap WorkChoices contracts in the future, while retaining the hundreds of thousands which already exist. At the same time, however, he has committed a Labor government to an industrial system that, just like WorkChoices itself, meets the demands of business for "flexibility."

Millions of ordinary people have opposed Howard's legislation out of a recognition that it will destroy living standards and social conditions, not only for themselves but for the next, and future, generations.

The perspective of the Labor Party and trade unions is very different. As far as they are concerned, their anti-WorkChoices rhetoric is part of a campaign aimed at establishing their credentials to the corporate and financial elites. Only a partnership between a Labor government and the trade union apparatus is capable of initiating the next round of "economic restructuring". Only such a partnership can impose the measures that will become necessary once the China boom winds down or collapses.

In this, Rudd's Labor "team" is responding to repeated criticisms of the Howard government by the corporate and financial elites, reflected in editorial columns in the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review*. According to them, the government has pulled back from implementing further far-reaching "economic reforms". Indeed, the *Australian* has commented more than once that more was achieved

in this area by the Hawke-Keating government than under Howard.

But the "achievements" of Hawke and Keating were predicated upon the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy—from the implementation of the prices and incomes Accord in 1983, to the smashing of the Builders Labourers Federation in 1986, through to the use of troops in breaking the airline pilots' strike in 1989 and the introduction of so-called enterprise agreements, which laid the basis for the "trade-offs" of basic conditions that form the basis of Howard's industrial relations regime.

So the Labor and trade union leaders insist they must be called upon once again. And politically-sensitive sections of the upper-middle class sense that, this time, a Labor government could win. Suddenly a host of "celebrities" and union bureaucrats has emerged to offer themselves as new Labor candidates—just as numbers of coalition MPs announce that it is now time to retire.

Socialist alternative

An election campaign can be a decisive experience for millions of people, especially youth. If it is to contribute to a genuine development in political education and understanding, some basic truths must be established from the outset.

The first is that the Labor Party represents no political alternative to the Howard government. Anyone who argues that it does, or that, at the very least, it should be supported because it constitutes a "lesser evil", is either naïve or engaged in conscious deception.

Drawing the historical balance sheet on the role of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy is well overdue. Far from representing the working class, these organisations, and their nationalist programs, have become mechanisms for subordinating its interests to the demands and dictates of the financial markets and corporations.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will be the only party speaking for the working class in the 2007 federal elections. The central axis of the party's campaign will be the need for working people to advance their own independent political perspective against war and militarism, in defence of democratic rights, and for genuine social equality.

There can be no solution to the problems confronting millions of ordinary people within the existing political set-up. Workers and youth must carry out a decisive political break from all the establishment parties and take up the political struggle for the perspective of socialist internationalism. Only through the revolutionary reorganisation of society, placing social need above the accumulation of private wealth and profit, can the basic needs of the vast majority be met. We urge all supporters and *World Socialist Web Site* readers to contact the SEP and to join us in the struggle to build it as the new mass party of the working class.

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