

Portrait of an Australian by-election

The gulf between official politics and ordinary people

Our reporters
25 August 1998

On the surface, the recent state by-election held in the seat of Northcote in Melbourne's northern suburbs on August 15, produced a predictable, unsurprising result. The Australian Labor Party's candidate, Mary Delahunty, a high-profile media personality, was returned with a hefty majority (60 percent of the vote) in a seat that has been held continuously by the Labor Party since the electorate was created in 1927.

But probing somewhat deeper, it becomes apparent that things are not as stable as they initially appear. Behind the raw voting figures lies a thorough-going parliamentary crisis, and, as a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team discovered, an electorate profoundly disaffected with all the parliamentary parties, including Labor.

The Northcote by-election was the first conducted since the recent Queensland state election, which saw 11 candidates from the extreme rightwing party, One Nation, voted into office.

One Nation's candidates secured support from the electoral base of every capitalist party--Liberal, National and Labor. If repeated across the country in the forthcoming federal elections, Queensland's results demonstrated that One Nation has the potential to win enough parliamentary seats to hold the balance of power, not only in the Senate but in the House of Representatives as well.

The ruling class, shocked by One Nation's rapid rise, and deeply troubled at the prospect of a hung parliament, minority government and growing instability--not to mention the potential damage to its markets in Asia--sprang into action.

After months of glaring--and not altogether unfavourable--publicity in the media, attacks on One Nation suddenly appeared from every quarter. The media, Victorian Liberal premier, Jeff Kennett, former Australian prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, business leaders, the Democrats, the Labor Party all denounced its racist agenda and heaped scorn on its parliamentary leader, Pauline Hanson. 'Investigative' journalists began probing One Nation's organisational structure and finances, while a Zionist publication went so far as to print the names of some 2,000 alleged members, in the name of fighting racism.

On the 'left' flank of this de-facto coalition were to be found all the various radical protest groupings, for whom the defining feature of political life has become 'for' or 'against' One Nation.

When One Nation announced it would stand a candidate in the Northcote by-election, this alliance of corporate executives, bourgeois politicians, the news media and the radicals went into over-drive. Northcote became the test case for future elections.

The Victorian Liberal government, which had previously decided not to run a candidate, made the unprecedented decision to spend over \$30,000 in a special mailout, urging Northcote voters to support the Australian Democrats and put One Nation last on the ballot paper.

The Australian Democrats, Greens, and radicals, including the Democratic Socialist Party and the Progressive Labour Party, held joint meetings and activities urging voters to reject One Nation. The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) called for a Labor vote.

When the votes were finally counted on polling night, One Nation had secured only 6 percent. State ALP leader John Brumby declared the result a 'stunning victory' and *The Age* newspaper, voice of the local establishment, hailed it as 'a vindication of Victoria's robust and tolerant democracy'.

But closer investigation reveals a different picture. WSWs reporters spent the day interviewing numbers of people at polling booths throughout the electorate. The prevailing mood was disaffection and frustration, combined with a general feeling that neither Labor, nor any of the candidates or parties could provide a socially progressive answer to the deepening social crisis they confront.

Instead of the old loyalties and allegiances, we found that voting patterns have become increasingly volatile, with former Labor supporters voting for the Australian Democrats, Liberal supporters voting Labor and vice-versa. No-one we met professed active support for any party. Yet they were all eager to discuss political issues.

George Lucas, a former State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) electrician, now in his fifties and working as a contractor, was typical of the migrant workers who voted Labor. After telling us he had voted ALP, Lucas declared his opposition to the privatisation of the SECV and then declared:

'[B]ut there is bad management whether it is Labor or Liberal. They sell off things like the SEC to pay off debts that they created. I have complained about this to other candidates and parties.'

When asked what should be done to solve the social problems confronting workers Lucas said: 'We have to forget about the Labor Party, the Liberal Party and of course we have to forget about One Nation. What we need is new people, modern people--people that will go over to the 21st century. They have to restructure the whole country for the future population.'

Yollette Dezilwa, an English language teacher said: 'When I vote at the next election, I will probably vote ALP. I don't think this will resolve anything but I can't see any alternative. Coalitions and small parties don't change anything, but I don't have the answers.'

Twenty-eight-year-old Chris Lynch, originally from Tasmania, epitomised the sentiment of many young people who voted for the ALP: 'I voted for Labor, but with much misgivings. I didn't like the Democrats because Kennett had given them an endorsement.'

'I just don't feel very happy about this election per se. Mary Delahunty has been pushed on to us--just because we're 'good Labor voters', just like Martin Ferguson [former ACTU president and now the local federal Labor MP] was set up...

'I didn't want to vote Labor, but I didn't want to vote Democrats either--so it was really convoluted. I only voted for Mary Delahunty because I wanted to stick it up Kennett. I hate Kennett and I hate everybody's policies of economic rationalism. I just went for the lesser of two evils.'

She added: 'But they [the ALP] don't know anything about the issues

that affect people. If Labor had been in power for the last few years, they would have sold off everything and done exactly the same thing as the Liberals have done. But they would have done it under the guise of social justice.'

The social crisis has reached into virtually every aspect of ordinary people's lives.

Chris said: 'Nobody has job tenure, nobody has a job for life. There hasn't been a sense of community for years and people feel threatened. There are families out there trying to raise two or three kids on \$500 a week.

I've just been made redundant from a community sector job I had held for eighteen months. Prior to that I was made redundant at a bank. Things are being marginalised and downsized and I find a lot of my friends can only find part-time and casual-type work. Someone of the same age ten years ago would probably have found a decent job with decent pay by now.

I just feel that people now in their 20s and 30s are like a generation that really didn't get started. I haven't really got anywhere and it's not through lack of trying. Many jobs simply don't exist anymore...'

Yollette Dezilwa explained what she felt were the major issues: 'All the economic issues of taking care of people, what has happened to pensioners, especially migrants, where there have been so many cuts to services. Also, the fact that employment-wise the government has washed their hands of a whole section of the migrant community. The two-year period before you can claim welfare makes it really difficult for migrants.'

Vicky Presser, an integration aide who assists children with learning disabilities, commented: 'Cutbacks to education have affected me severely... It's very difficult to get the sort of funding needed to help students with difficulties. This government is reversing everything that was done in the 70s and just putting these students into institutions and saying we don't want these type of kids in the schools. What do we tell their parents now? Sorry, we can't have your child here because it costs us too much, or we don't have the time to look after them?'

All those interviewed voiced their concerns over the emergence of One Nation. Vicki Presser said she opposed all forms of immigration control.

'I think it's troubling that people are coming out of the woodwork and supporting what they see as One Nation's 'good' policies without having the political education to look at the other things they put forward. I'm a single mother, I'm very concerned about what they're saying,' she said.

Thirty-year-old David Hornbeck, a sculptor whose family migrated from France in 1976, compared the situation to the 1930s and warned that fascism could arise in any country 'if the people are not educated to have a certain consciousness...'

'One Nation is playing at supermarket politics; grabbing an ideology and making it cheap, accessible to all. That's what the real enemy is, cheap ideology. That's my point of view and I believe in debate and discussion,' he said.

Yollette Dezilwa made a direct connection between the rise of One Nation and the increase in poverty, unemployment and the economic hardship facing small farmers.

'When economic times are difficult people look for scapegoats. It reminds me of the situation before the Second World War when people looked at other nationalities as causing the problem. This is a naive way of looking at things,' she said.

Chris Lynch said: 'I think people just want a scapegoat for the problems they are confronting.'

But the generalised opposition to One Nation displayed in Northcote is still largely conceived within the prism of nationalist politics.

Many referred to a 'divided country' and called for 'all Australians' to be united. George Lucas, for example, said: 'We're going into the 21st century as a divided nation. We should be going into it as a united nation, even though we have different opinions.' Vicky Presser declared: 'We

need to be united again. We are a completely divided country. If we are divided the government gets away with whatever it wants.'

On the other hand, earlier in the discussion, replying to a question whether or not there could be a national solution to the growing social crisis, Vicky commented:

'You can't turn back the clock; economically it is not a viable proposition. Australia is now completely a part of the global economy. The problem is who controls this globalisation. It is controlled by businesses and used simply to increase their wealth. Globalisation could open up a whole new system. Potentially we could have a world where words like 'migrant' would no longer exist... Look at the World Wide Web. You can now communicate and reach so far...'

This is precisely the issue. The processes of globalisation have undermined all the old national states, parties and programs. Vicky's answer points to the anachronistic character of the nation state system and the politics based on it. The issue is not uniting 'all Australians' but the unity of the international working class in a common struggle against international capital and the profit system.

In other words, to combat the poisonous politics of nationalism and racism requires an independent socialist and internationalist perspective based on the needs and interests of the working class.

On this question there is no shortage of confusion. Several people commented that 'in theory' they agreed with socialism, but not as it had been practised in the Soviet Union.

Yollette Dezilwa raised that the failure of communism in Russia was the reason that large numbers of people had not turned towards a socialist solution to the growing social problems.

When we pointed out that the Soviet regime was neither socialist nor communist, but a Stalinist bureaucracy based on nationalism and social inequality, she replied:

'Yes, that may be true but people don't really delve into the historical questions very deeply. They, and I include myself, have a sort of newspaper view of history. I haven't looked into the complexity of it. But I suppose I should.'

See Also:

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[15 August 1998]

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