

Australian election debate:

Howard and Beazley share common agenda

Linda Tenenbaum
15 September 1998

If patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, nationalism is the banner of the desperate politician. In the only debate of the election campaign, held on Sunday night between Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Labor leader Kim Beazley, neither lost an opportunity to mention the word 'Australia' or 'Australian' in nearly every sentence. The reason was that both of them were intent on covering up their real agendas--and their basic unanimity.

During his last debate against former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1996, Howard made his appeal to the 'battlers'--the victims of Labor's attacks on jobs, living standards and social services. Two and a half years later, he has been forced to change tack. Having been kicked into line by big business for his lack of resolve in cutting corporate taxes and raising a GST (consumption tax), and faced with a leadership challenge if he doesn't, he spent the entire debate arguing for his new tax regime. In 1996 he promised that life would be 'relaxed and comfortable'. This time he was the man with the toughness and courage to implement 'risky' policies, involving pain now in exchange for 'goodies' in the future.

The problem for Howard is that a Goods and Services Tax will further erode the living standards of the vast majority of the population, and most people know it. So, to drum up his waning electoral support, he tried to present the new tax as a universal panacea. His one and only answer to every question about the social crisis--mass unemployment, including 60 percent youth unemployment in major working class areas, the crisis in the public health system, the lack of dental care for the elderly, the rundown of public education--was that the GST would fix it.

Beazley, on the other hand, faces a slightly different

problem. In the 1996 elections, the Keating government recorded the lowest vote for Labor in history. Its working class base deserted it in droves, and has largely failed to return. For Beazley the problem is: how to win back that working class support?

Labor strategists have decided that the best way is for the Labor leader to distance himself as much as possible from the legacy of Labor's 13 years in office, and to try and resurrect the myth of a Labor party that 'cares'. Thus Beazley mentioned no less than three times that he had 'eaten humble pie'. He referred to as many social issues as he could possibly squeeze in--without committing to any concrete solutions. Of course he never addressed why Labor's previous policies had created such resentment, because to do so would have been to let the cat out of the bag. What the record shows is that both Labor and Liberal, whatever their tactical differences, defend exactly the same class interests-- those of the corporate elite--at the expense of the mass of ordinary people.

When Howard affirmed--at least twice--that the GST would lift \$10.5 billion from the tax burden of business, Beazley let it pass without objection. No rejoinder was forthcoming that the burden would be imposed instead on ordinary working people.

And this was not the only significant omission of the night. At no stage did Beazley even refer to the class implications of the Liberals' policies. Noticeably absent, for example, was any mention of the waterfront dispute. Earlier this year, the Liberals conspired with Patrick's Stevedoring to sack the entire workforce, using dogs and hooded guards to drive the wharfies from the docks. Initially the Laborites raised some mild objections. Then the Liberals leaked documents revealing that the Keating government had been preparing to do exactly the same thing. From then on

the issue was quickly dropped.

Nor did Beazley raise the privatisation of Telstra and the sacking of thousands of Telstra workers, because privatisations and mass sackings have been central to Labor's own agenda. Similarly with the Liberals' 'work-for-the-dole' and cheap labour schemes for youth, which Labor has supported.

The underlying accord between the two parties was underscored in the summing up. While both politicians made liberal use of the 'buzz words' of this election campaign: 'mateship', 'egalitarianism', 'fairness', 'equity', and a 'united nation'. Howard was the most explicit. His vision for Australia, he declared, was 'classlessness', and the 'lack of class consciousness'.

The *Australian Financial Review* concluded: 'The debate produced a high degree of agreement between the two leaders.' The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Hugh Mackay wrote a comment entitled: 'What a pity our leaders can't get together.' Here were 'representatives of two parties whose philosophical differences are, to most voters, quite blurry,' he remarked. 'If you'd swapped their closing remarks, no-one would have noticed.'

Absent from both the debate and the media commentary, yet dominating over it, was the social reality in which it took place--the greatest social polarisation in living memory, where class divisions have never been so acute.

The latest UN Human Development Report, released just last week, revealed that Australia had slumped from seventh to fifteenth in its rankings of countries according to the level of social achievements over the past three years--behind the US, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and Spain.

The study found that 9 percent of the Australian population would not live to the age of 60, around 17 percent (well over three million people) were functionally illiterate and 9 percent (around 2 million) lived below the poverty line.

It also found that the gap between rich and poor had widened, with the top 20 percent earning 10 times more income than the bottom 20 percent. This put Australia nearly on a par with Russia, where the disparity was 11 times. At the same time, Australia recorded the highest rate of drug-related crimes per 100,000 people in the world.

The disgust felt by millions towards both parties has

been provoked by these social conditions. In the coming period, the deepening global recession--barely mentioned in the debate--will see the eruption of social conflict, which neither Howard nor Beazley will be able to wish away.

See Also:

A revealing election dispute in Australia
[12 September 1998]

Unemployment set to soar in Australia

A tacit agreement to deny reality
[10 September 1998]

See the Election Campaign '98 web site of the
Socialist Equality Party



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact