

Dissatisfaction dominates Australian election

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With just three days left to polling day, the outcome of the Australian federal election this Saturday is more uncertain than ever. Media polls point to an extraordinarily volatile situation. They suggest that neither the conservative Coalition government of Prime Minister Howard nor the Labor Party opposition may be able to form a majority regime, resulting in what is termed a 'hung parliament'.

In a sign of desperation, both camps have shifted their television advertising at the last minute to appeal for second preference votes from other parties, including the extreme right-wing One Nation. Under the Australian electoral system, voters must allocate preferences to every candidate on the ballot paper. Where no candidate gains 50 percent, these preferences can determine the result.

Despite being elected in an anti-Labor landslide just 30 months ago in 1996, and holding a near-record majority of 44 in the 148-seat lower house, the Howard's Liberal-National Party government now appears set to either lose the election or try to cling to office with the support of various 'independents' and others.

Popular dissatisfaction toward an entire election campaign has never been so great. In fact, the media proprietors admit that their opinion polls cannot provide an accurate gauge of the level of antagonism and distrust. Reportedly, many people refuse to participate in the polls; others give deliberately misleading answers.

On average, however, the polls point to an underlying shift. One such poll conducted over the weekend in four closely contested New South Wales electorates showed that only 18 percent of voters intended to stick with the party they always voted for. In other words, 82 percent have abandoned their former political loyalties.

These results suggest a complete reversal of the post-war pattern. For decades 80 percent or more of voters backed Labor or Liberal-National, with perhaps 18 percent regarded as 'swinging voters'. Now, with just a week to go, more than a third were yet to finally make up their minds.

Media pundits have begun to write about a phenomenon they find puzzling and, indeed, threatening--a gap between 'elite opinion' and public opinion. In one such comment, Deborah Hope wrote in the *Australian* on Monday: 'Australian commentators calling the federal election would perhaps have been wise to note the recent gulf between public and elite

opinion in the US over the Clinton presidency.'

After observing that Clinton's job approval rating had gone up after the media's elite opinion-makers forecast that the Starr report on the Monica Lewinsky affair would be his demise, Hope observed: 'In Australia, over the same period, a striking characteristic of the federal election campaign has been the failure of commentators to pick the national mood reflected in the polls.'

This 'national mood' has deep roots. Over the past decade and a half, first under 13 years of Labor rule and then under Howard, the broad mass of working people have suffered an unrelenting offensive against their living standards and social conditions.

Successive governments have implemented the demands of the corporate sector for cost-cutting, job-slashing and privatisation. In 1996, after gaining office by posturing as defenders of the 'battlers' devastated by Labor, the Coalition swiftly intensified the cuts to education, health care, childcare, aged care, public housing and legal aid.

The urgent issues confronting ordinary people--permanent mass unemployment, economic insecurity, growing inequality--are barely mentioned in the official campaign. Even when they are, it has become increasingly obvious that no-one believes what the politicians say.

The same newspaper poll, for example, reported that two-thirds do not believe Labor's claim that it can reduce the official unemployment rate to 5 percent over six years. On the other side, 77 percent believe that a Goods and Services Tax (GST)--the sweeping consumption tax proposed by the Coalition--will rise above the promised level of 10 percent.

Howard, anxious to meet the requirements of big business, has staked almost everything in this election on the introduction of a GST, even after a similar proposal led to his party's defeat at the 1993 election. And, apart from opposing the GST, Labor leader Kim Beazley has banked his entire campaign on convincing voters that the Laborites will try to reach their 5 percent jobless target.

The smell of political death now wafts over Howard's camp. Sniffing the electoral wind, some MPs from his own coalition partners, the rural-based National Party, have publicly opposed the imposition of a GST on food, just as they earlier rejected the government's planned full privatisation of Telstra, the telecommunications company. Even a \$3 billion Federation

Fund, designed to pay for pork-barrelling projects in key electorates, has been spent without making any dent in the government's slide.

As a consequence, tensions have erupted between Howard and the deputy Liberal leader, Treasurer Peter Costello, who is backed by key media and corporate figures to replace Howard. The latter asserted on Sunday he had the right to remain Prime Minister even if the government was only returned with a slim majority.

Dissatisfaction from big business is also overshadowing the official campaign. The corporate world is increasingly concerned, and somewhat incredulous, that the Howard government has so comprehensively botched its term in office, and the election campaign itself.

Almost as if speaking with gritted teeth, newspapers such as the *Australian Financial Review* have remarked that with his huge parliamentary majority, Howard should have been able to go to the polls with confidence. Even when Howard called the election a month ago, it seemed a foregone conclusion.

In an editorial yesterday, the newspaper said that by choosing to go to the polls so soon after unveiling his GST plan, Howard had 'nobody but himself to blame if the debate on the issue during the campaign has been confused by scare tactics, uncertainty and misunderstanding'.

Other media commentators have bitterly complained that Howard utterly miscalculated by bringing forward the GST **before**, and indeed on the eve of, an election. After all, Howard waited until **after** the last election to reveal his plans for \$6 billion in spending cuts.

More fundamentally, business chiefs are alarmed that the election debacle has derailed, at least temporarily, the social onslaught of the past 15 years. Newspaper editorials have roundly condemned Howard and Beazley for making any election promises at all, in the light of the global economic crisis.

In yesterday's editorial, the *Financial Review* declared: 'This year's election has been fought in a surreal bubble, with the Coalition and Labor doing their best to ignore what is potentially the worst global economic environment Australia has faced since the 1930s.'

'The Australian economy will slow significantly over the next few years, but the Coalition and Labor have been ignoring the inevitable because it makes their election promises all the more farcical. The Coalition's \$18 billion tax plan and Labor's 5 percent unemployment target are unrealistic in a rapidly deteriorating economic environment.'

Whatever government is formed after the election, it will be instructed by the corporate elite to abandon even the meagre commitments made in the election campaign and set about the task of imposing the burden of the global meltdown on the back of the working class.

Already, it is being reported that Treasury has prepared much lower estimates for economic growth next year, making a

mockery of the Howard government's assertion that it still expects nearly 4 percent growth. In all likelihood, these figures will be released within days of the election, laying the basis for further draconian cuts to government spending.

A similar release followed the 1996 election, when the incoming Howard government feigned surprise that the budget deficit was much larger than the Keating government had reported during the election campaign. Just ten days after that election, Howard used the claim of a \$10 billion budget 'black hole' to prepare the ground for multi-billion dollar cuts to education, health care, jobs programs and the public sector as a whole.

Yet despite the widespread hostility generated by these experiences, what is still lacking among working people is an understanding of the need to strike out on an independent political road in defence of their own class interests. Millions of people have arrived at a political impasse.

As part of its fight to build a new mass socialist party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party is standing six candidates across New South Wales and Victoria, covering nearly 60 percent of the country's population. It is the only party standing on the fundamental principle that the immense social wealth produced by modern technology and the labour of the working people should be used to uplift the quality of life for all, not fill the corporate coffers.

Unlike the media and the old parties, which are striving to suppress any genuine political debate, the SEP campaign has opened up a discussion with important layers of young people, workers and retired people on the need for a socialist alternative. For the first time, it has been able to utilise the *World Socialist Web Site*, augmented by the SEP Election 98 web site, to publish a wide range of political comments by its candidates and to generate a dialogue with people across the country and internationally.

Despite a general blackout by the media owners, SEP candidates have received some coverage in local and regional newspapers and on some local TV and radio stations. The party is holding 26 local public meetings and two election rallies and distributing 100,000 copies of its election statement. In that statement, the SEP explains the three pillars of its program, not just for the election but for the great upheavals and struggles that lie ahead: (1) the international unity of the working class; (2) social equality; (3) a workers government.



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