

Narrow result in Australian election

Vote for two traditional parties falls to new low

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Despite one of the largest anti-government swings in Australian history, the Howard Liberal-National Party government will hold onto office with a vastly reduced majority after last Saturday's federal election. With counting still continuing in close seats, the government is likely to see its near-record majority of 44 seats in the 148-member House of Representatives fall to somewhere between 5 and 10.

Only two and a half years ago the Coalition swept to power in a landslide defeat for the Labor Party, taking 92 seats to Labor's 49. On Saturday the Coalition suffered an even worse debacle. Its primary vote fell by 7.8 percentage points, plummeting to less than 40 percent. The Liberal Party vote plunged to 34 percent, while its coalition partner, the rural-based National Party, won just 5 percent.

As a result, the government is set to lose 17 seats--the biggest-ever loss by an administration in its first three-year term. After the allocation of preference votes from other parties, its vote is the worst recorded by an incumbent government in 40 years. A number of cabinet ministers may lose their seats, including Foreign Affairs Minister and former Liberal leader, Alexander Downer, and Family Services Minister Warwick Smith.

Yet the Howard government will survive because Labor only improved its primary vote by 1.6 percent, taking its total to 40.8 percent. This is its second lowest vote in the post-war period, after plunging 6.3 points to 37.8 percent in 1996. In particular, Labor failed to recover any votes in the outer suburbs of the major cities, among younger working class and lower middle class families. One of Labor's failed candidates in these areas, former Australian Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot, indignantly denounced the Labor leaders for forcing her to contest such a seat.

While the outcome has taken the form of the return of the government, the reality is more complex. Taken together, the vote for the two major parties fell to just 80 percent--the lowest in 55 years. This represents a disintegration of the

relatively stable support that these parties commanded in the post-war period. The mass media attempted to disguise this shift by referring only to 'two-party preferred' figures, that is, the outcome after the distribution of all the preferences of the 20 percent of votes cast for independents and other parties. That produces the misleading claim that 51.4 percent of voters supported Labor and 48.6 percent backed the Coalition.

Since 1996 the Howard government has slashed billions of dollars from social spending, particularly on education, health care, public housing, aged care and child care. It also went to the polls proposing a highly unpopular and retrogressive switch from income tax to consumption tax (a Goods and Services Tax--GST). Even so, Labor failed dismally.

Most of the anti-government swing went to the extreme right-wing racist and nationalist One Nation party, which polled 8.4 percent nationally and 14 percent in the northern state of Queensland. In some rural electorates it won over a quarter of the vote, close to its result in June's Queensland state election. The party's founder Pauline Hanson lost her seat, but One Nation will have one member in the upper house, the Senate.

Few independents and other parties attracted support, reversing a trend of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Australian Democrats, an alternative capitalist party supported by smaller sections of national industry, may increase its numbers in the Senate from its current tally of seven, but largely as a result of preference-swapping deals with the government and Labor. It polled just 5 percent in the lower house and about 8 percent in the Senate, losing more than 2 percentage points from 1996.

The voting statistics provide only a surface impression of the chasm that exists between the established political parties and the vast majority of working people after a decade and a half of attacks on jobs and living standards under both Labor and Coalition governments. If voting were

not compulsory and voters not obliged to cast preference votes for every candidate on the ballot papers, the results would show even less support for the current political framework.

Within official political circles and in the media a contrived debate has erupted over whether the decimated Howard government has a 'mandate' to proceed with the GST. The Australian Democrats are claiming an alternative mandate to modify the GST in the Senate to exclude food and some other items. In reality, having embraced the consumption tax plan in principle, the Democrats are already signalling their readiness to strike a deal with Howard or Liberal Party deputy leader Peter Costello, and any such deal will be accepted by the Labor Party.

The truth is that there is no popular support for the GST, let alone the rest of the economic program that the government will seek to implement as the economy deteriorates. However, the main capitalist parties are united in their commitment to meeting the requirements of business for the slashing of corporate taxes and social spending at the expense of the working class, above all the youth. The election campaign expressed a further fundamental shift to the right, with the government and Labor vying to produce more vicious forms of 'work-for-the-dole,' foreshadowing a wider assault on the welfare system.

The contradiction dominating the weakened government is that it must press ahead with such policies that are incompatible with the interests of the mass of ordinary people. During the campaign all sides did their best to suppress discussion about the global financial meltdown. Yet within weeks, if not days, the government will release revised Treasury forecasts showing a far lower rate of growth than the 3.5 percent predicted for next year. As it did after the 1996 election, the government will declare that new circumstances mean it cannot meet its election commitments and must cut deeper into living standards.

Having brought the government so perilously close to defeat after holding a record majority, Howard is under pressure from within ruling circles to stand aside to make way for the Liberal Party deputy leader, Treasurer Peter Costello, who is perceived by the money markets as a tougher proponent of austerity measures. Yet within both the Liberal and National parties, anxious MPs are publicly opposing the government's intention to tax food consumption as part of the GST and to sell off the remainder of Telstra, the government-owned telecommunications company.

In Labor's camp, factional infighting and bloodletting have quickly emerged, belying Labor leader Kim Beazley's claims of a Labor revival. In addition to Cheryl Kernot, other Labor figures have engaged in bitter recriminations over their loss.

Deputy Labor leader and former foreign minister Gareth Evans abruptly quit politics on Saturday night as soon as it appeared that the government would remain.

The only party that told the truth in the election campaign was the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP pointed out that world capitalism was plunging into its greatest crisis since the 1930s, devastating the lives of millions internationally. The party said the working class had to seek a new road--that of building an independent political movement based on a socialist perspective to totally reorganise society.

Even more than in previous years, the mass media imposed an almost complete blackout on the socialist campaign. Not one metropolitan daily paper or radio or television station published a word about the SEP's candidates. In some cases, journalists wrote articles only to have the material spiked by their editors.

Despite this, and a bewildering field of 60 or so candidates for the Senate in each state, the SEP tickets for the Senate--Nick Beams and Carol Divjak in New South Wales and Sue Phillips and Will Marshall in Victoria--had polled some 2,600 votes by the end of counting on Saturday. In the Wollongong seat of Throsby SEP candidate Peter Stavropoulos had obtained nearly 350 votes and in the Hunter Valley, Terry Cook had polled just over 100.

Even more important than these votes--cast consciously for a socialist alternative--were the scores of people, especially young people, who signed up for further discussion with the SEP and the number of young workers and students who participated in the SEP campaign. A central feature of the campaign was the political analysis provided by the party and its candidates on issues ranging from the world economic turmoil to the unprecedented breakdowns of water and gas services in Sydney and Melbourne.



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