

# Defeat for Australian republic referendum highlights social divide

Mike Head

9 November 1999

The clear defeat of the “republican” referendum last Saturday demonstrates the immense class divide that dominates Australian society.

Virtually every newspaper in the country urged a yes vote, as did leading figures from all the parliamentary parties, along with a galaxy of “stars” and sporting personalities. But only 46 percent of voters supported the proposed switch to a republican form of rule. The referendum failed to win a majority in all six states. Of the 148 federal electorates, only 42 voted yes.

Even fewer people voted for a suggested preamble to the Constitution, which was an attempt to define a new basis for “national unity”. It was drafted personally by Prime Minister Howard and approved unanimously by the Members of Parliament of all the parties. Yet it received just 39.8 percent support.

These results in themselves show the chasm that has opened up between the political, media and business elites and wide layers of the population. Media opinion polls indicated that only 10 percent of voters actually agreed with a continued attachment to the British monarchy. The “no” vote was overwhelmingly one of distrust, disillusionment and hostility directed toward the entire political establishment.

As one embittered newspaper editorial put it, the “cream of society”—the politicians, the celebrities, the academics and the business executives—backed the officially-endorsed republican model, only to have it rejected by the rest of society. The proposed scheme became known as the “politicians’ republic” or the “republic of the rich” that would simply hand more power over to the political and economic elite.

Even more striking was the polarised voting pattern. The “yes” vote was concentrated in the wealthiest enclaves of the major cities, largely inhabited by the most privileged layers. The “no” vote was strongest in the working class suburbs and the regional and rural areas.

Nineteen of the top 25 federal electorates in terms of income voted yes, whereas 84 of the bottom 100 electorates

voted no. All the “yes” electorates were in the big city centres where a narrow strata has benefitted from the economic restructuring driven by global markets over the past two decades.

Electoral maps depicting the results show islands of “yes” voters around the corporate and financial headquarters of Sydney, Melbourne and other state capitals, encircled by a sea of “no” voters stretching from the industrial suburbs into the remote heart of the continent.

Sydney, the country’s most polarised city, produced the sharpest class divide. The strongest “yes” votes came in the inner city—the home of the new upper middle class professional layers—and the North Shore and Eastern Suburbs, the traditional provinces of the rich. The highest vote—68 percent—was in central Sydney, followed by 62 percent in North Sydney and 60 percent in Wentworth (the Eastern Suburbs). In Prime Minister Howard’s comfortable North Shore electorate of Bennelong, the vote was 55 percent in favour, even though Howard and several of his key cabinet ministers campaigned for a no vote.

But in the far-flung and poorest working class regions of Sydney—Werriwa (Campbelltown) and Chifley (Mount Druitt)—the vote was 42 percent. Beyond the Sydney metropolitan area, in rural New South Wales, where the poverty and unemployment produced by economic restructuring have hit hardest, support fell to as low as 27 percent.

There was a similar demarcation in Melbourne, the home of many of the country’s manufacturing, retailing and landed magnates, as well as millions of working people. The yes vote in central Melbourne was the highest in the country—71.5 percent, followed by votes of 60 percent or more throughout the “blue-ribbon” Eastern Suburbs electorates.

By contrast, in the working class northern, western and south-eastern suburbs, the vote was in the mid-40s. In Dunkley (Frankston), for example, the same area that recently sealed the fate of defeated Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, the figure was 45 percent. Rural areas of Victoria

produced votes below 30 percent.

The only state or territory to endorse the plan was the Australian Capital Territory. Based on Canberra, the national seat of government, it has high average income levels. In the other state capitals, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart, just the handful of affluent electorates voted yes. In rural and provincial regions, the no vote ran as high as 77.25 percent in the vast Queensland seat of Maranoa, which ranks among the lowest in levels of family income and tertiary education.

The voting results produced a vicious reaction from the yes campaign's strongest advocates. Former Labor party hack and politician, Graham Richardson, who has clawed his way up the corporate ladder, an employee of Australia's richest man, denounced the "less educated suburbs who voted for the monarchy". Others demanded "more simple messages" that could be "more understood".

The prevailing attitude in these circles was that the "battlers" who rejected the republic were ignorant, ill-informed and lacking in intelligence. So much for democracy! Their comments echo those of last century, when the ruling elite of the day strenuously objected to universal suffrage on the ground that the common people, and women especially, were too ill-educated to be trusted with a vote.

There is also a fear in ruling circles that the disenchantment expressed in the referendum could assume other, more articulate, political forms in the coming period. The *Australian's* international editor Paul Kelly wrote on Monday's front page:

"The defeat of the republic exposes Australia as two different societies—a confident, educated, city-based middle class and a pessimistic, urban and rural battler constituency hostile to the 1990s change agenda. This schism is not just an insuperable obstacle to a republic. It is far more serious—a threat to a cohesive and successful Australia as it tries to adapt to the globalised economy of the new millennium."

The "1990s change agenda" has seen an unprecedented redistribution of wealth up the income scale. Downsizing, privatisation, cost-cutting and corporate tax handouts have resulted in mass retrenchments, the destruction of permanent employment, the lowering of wages and the gutting of social services.

These processes have fueled a stockmarket and real estate frenzy that has enriched a burgeoning layer of millionaires through the impoverishment of the rest of society. Those who have prospered from this "change" are epitomised by the head of the Australian Republican Movement, merchant banker Malcolm Turnbull, who had no trouble in contributing \$3 million from his own pocket to the referendum campaign.

The referendum verdict is the sharpest expression so far of

the negative sentiment that has ousted one government after the other, both Labor and Liberal, over the past decade. Every new champion of the "change agenda"—from former New South Wales premier Nick Greiner to Keating and Kennett—has felt this backlash.

The result saw the nominal victor, John Howard, who campaigned for a no vote and scored, on the face of it, his biggest-ever electoral victory, roundly castigated by the media owners.

Under the headline, "A failure of leadership," the *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial yesterday lashed out at him, accusing the prime minister of blocking a revamp of the current, discredited, constitutional order:

"John Howard should reflect on his lost place in Australian history. He must know that Saturday's referendum settled nothing. Seventy-five percent of Australians want a republic, and they will eventually get one. The debate will continue. But it will remain confused, bitter and divisive until another leader steps forward to bring the country together."

In the referendum's aftermath, Howard has ordered a clamp on any further public discussion by Liberal party members. Whether or not this will succeed is another matter. Business leaders are insisting that the republic remain on the agenda and various politicians have already begun touting alternative models.

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, a Labor leader, immediately advanced a "minimalist, minimalist" model to retain the Governor-General, and simply delete all references to the Queen in the Constitution. "Direct election" advocates are supporting a "Real Republic" with an elected President. Two state Labor leaders volunteered to fashion a modified version, incorporating some form of popular input into the selection of a President. Beazley committed a future Labor government to holding a plebiscite on the monarchy, to be followed by another bid to hammer out an acceptable republican plan.

But none of the proponents have any proposals to bridge the yawning class chasm that the referendum's outcome has so clearly revealed.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**