

Middle class voters desert Liberal government in Australian by-election

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In the third electoral contest in Australia in just six weeks, the Howard Coalition government has suffered yet another rout. Following major swings against the conservative Liberal-National Coalition parties in two state elections last month, a by-election in the federal seat of Ryan has witnessed a further outpouring of anti-government sentiment.

Located in metropolitan Brisbane, the capital of the north-eastern state of Queensland, Ryan is a leafy upper middle class suburban electorate. Since its establishment in 1949, it has been one of the safest, “blue-ribbon” Liberal seats in the country. As recently as three months ago, when Defence Minister John Moore resigned from parliament and the seat was declared vacant, the opposition Labor Party was undecided as to whether it should even bother to stand a candidate.

In last weekend's poll, the swing against the Liberals was 9.6 percent, with the party's primary vote (before the distribution of preferences from minor parties) plunging from 50 percent in the last general election in 1998 to 43 percent. Labor's primary vote rose 8 percent to 39 percent, giving it 50.1 percent of the vote after preferences. With some 800 pre-poll and postal votes still to be counted, Labor is marginally ahead, and looks likely to take the seat.

In light of the forthcoming general election, due before the end of the year, both the Liberal and Labor Parties ploughed significant resources into the campaign. The Liberals mailed 15,000 promotional videos to selected households as well as a personal plea from Prime Minister John Howard to Liberal voters not to abandon the party. For the first time in a by-election, Labor broadcast state-wide television advertisements, at considerable cost. In the two weeks leading up to the poll, senior politicians from all the contending parties,

major and minor, including Howard and Opposition leader Kim Beazley, pounded Ryan's pavements, door-knocking electors in a bid to consolidate their vote.

With opinion polls pointing to an almost certain Liberal defeat, the media turned out in force on Saturday to interview voters as they emerged from the polling booths, in an attempt to identify the reasons. Elderly retirees, small business proprietors and contractors told reporters they opposed the government's new Goods and Services Tax (GST) and high petrol prices. Medical professionals, accountants and academics lashed out at the “absurdity” and “unnecessary expense” of the by-election, remarking that the sitting member could easily have waited until the general election to resign. Many pointed to the economic downturn and attacked the government's arrogance, aloofness and failure to “listen”. Others raised concerns over Howard's “backward-looking” social policies: his attitude to immigrants and asylum-seekers, Aborigines and his continuing support for the British monarchy.

As in every election and by-election since 1996, when the Howard government first came to office, the swing was almost entirely negative—*against* the government rather than *for* Labor. The official “third party”, the Australian Democrats, also suffered a significant decline in support, dropping from 8 percent to 5 percent, after similar falls in the Queensland and Western Australian state elections. The Democrats, who hold the balance of power in the Senate, used their position to pass Howard's GST last year and are now embroiled in a bitter leadership contest. Most of their lost votes went to the Greens, who picked up 6 percent, an increase of 2.2 percent since 1998.

If the Ryan result were to be replicated in the general

election, the government would be ousted in a landslide, and the Coalition parties reduced to a parliamentary rump. Labor needs a swing of just one percent to win seven seats from the Coalition and form government. Referring to the outcomes of the three recent elections, the Prime Minister remarked: "I look back over the past couple of months and I feel as though the Government has been subjected to political carpet-bombing in relation to a large number of issues."

In the wake of the Ryan by-election, Howard has rushed to reassure the financial markets and big business that his government will continue to champion their interests through policies of "economic reform." At the same time, he has pledged to make "the impact of change... as palatable and as acceptable as possible to vulnerable sections of the community."

But these commitments are mutually exclusive. Like Labor, the Coalition rested, throughout the post-war years, on policies of national regulation, protection and social welfare. Its embrace of the free-market policies demanded by global capital and the corporate elite is precisely what has so deeply alienated many of its former constituents. Over the past 15 years, along with millions of working class families, family farmers, small businesspeople and large sections of the middle class have been plunged into insecurity and financial hardship, with no safety net to break their fall.

Moreover, Howard's efforts to claw back support in rural and regional areas through populist appeals to racism and social backwardness, have angered his urban constituents in electorates like Ryan, where the Liberals' vote has plummeted by a massive 18 percent since 1996.

As the *Financial Review* noted, the government is dominated by "tactical and philosophical confusion." The Coalition parties no longer have a cohesive ideological orientation. The anti-government sentiment emanating from the middle class has a multi-faceted character, underscoring one of the most critical features of the current political instability: the Liberal and National parties have lost any stable social base. The old concept of a "safe seat" no longer applies, while, conversely, the term "swinging voter" refers to a large percentage of the voting population. The middle ground of Australian politics, on which the stability of bourgeois democracy has rested for the past century, is irrevocably breaking apart.



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