

Alienation from the major parties revealed in Australian by-election

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A by-election for the seat of Aston in the Australian state of Victoria last Saturday has once again highlighted the extent of alienation and hostility towards the major parties. With a federal election due before the end of the year, both Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley were quick to put the best possible spin on what were poor results. All the hype, however, could not cover up the fact that the first preference votes for the Liberal and Labor parties fell significantly compared to the last election in 1998.

The vote for Howard's Liberal Party dropped from 48.5 percent to 40.3 percent—a fall of 8.2 percentage points—and Labor's vote declined from 38.5 percent to 37.1 percent—a decrease of 1.4 points. Taken together the vote for the major parties fell by 10 percentage points to just 77 percent. Under Australia's preferential voting system, the outcome of the election will be decided on the basis of the voting preferences of the 23 percent of voters who put one of the 13 other candidates first.

The result is still to be finalised with the counting of postal and pre-poll votes expected to last until the end of the week. On Tuesday morning, Liberal candidate Chris Pearce was 378 votes ahead of his Labor rival Kieran Boland and appeared likely to widen his lead with around 7,000 votes to count. If Pearce wins, it will be by a slender margin.

Howard attempted to take comfort in the fact that the swing against the Liberals was not higher. The government suffered two devastating defeats in the state elections in Queensland and Western Australian in February. Since the loss of the safe federal seat of Ryan in a March by-election, Howard has offered a string of electoral inducements pitched at what are regarded as the government's constituents—small business, the elderly and rural voters. The weekend vote in Aston, Howard insisted, showed that the government was now “well and truly back in the game”.

But the result is little consolation to the Liberals who on present trends are facing defeat in the federal poll. When Howard came to power in 1996, the Liberals took Aston with 55.6 percent of the vote after the distribution of preferences and again in 1998 with 54.2 percent. While the vote is yet to be finalised, if a swing of that order were repeated across the country, the government would lose more than 20 seats. It currently holds a majority of 12 in the 148-seat House of Representatives, so a loss of seven seats would see it fall.

The result points to a wider slump in support for the Liberals. A poll of marginal seats across the country published by the

Australian a week before the by-election revealed that the ruling Liberal-National Party Coalition faced a “wipe-out” at the federal election. Labor's support remained relatively steady at 44 percent but backing for the government parties fell from 36 percent to 32 percent over the last three months, exposing it to the loss of 22 seats.

While Aston is not a blue-ribbon Liberal seat, it takes in some better-off areas in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The average weekly household income at \$920 is relatively high. The seat has one of the highest proportions of homeowners and families paying off a mortgage in the country and a lower unemployment rate than Melbourne as a whole. The percentage of immigrant families and non-English speakers is lower than average and there is relatively little public housing. Aston is routinely labelled by media pundits as a “mortgage-belt” seat—the type that the Liberals have to win if they are to retain office.

In these areas, however, the policies of successive governments—Liberal and Labor—have had a devastating impact on the working class and layers of the middle class. Voters who spoke to *WSWS* reporters after casting their ballot on Saturday expressed their anger at the continuing erosion of living standards, the growing gulf between rich and poor and the rundown of public services such as hospitals and schools, as well as broader concerns about economic uncertainty and environmental degradation.

The Howard government's introduction of a Goods and Services Tax (GST) last year has generated widespread opposition not only because it falls hardest on those who can least afford to pay extra tax but from sections of small business who are burdened with collecting it. One small proprietor told the *WSWS* that he was switching his vote from Liberal to Labor for the first time since 1958. “The GST means I have no cash flow. And I have to have an accountant for the BAS [paperwork],” he said. “The whole economy is down, except for the big nobs who can afford to get it back somehow.”

A young housewife indicated that she was voting Labor after previously voting Liberal but quickly added: “They're all the same... I'm not keen on Beazley. He's another one who talks about it up front, then you wait forever for him to do anything. They are all talk, the lot of them... The GST was brought in, but nothing was brought in for families.” She went on to outline a long list of concerns about public education, the closure of a local primary school, the lack of a public hospital, poor public transport and the need for an extension of the Scoresby freeway into the

area.

Even among those who had voted Liberal, there was considerable anger with the Howard government over a number of issues. They had cast their ballot for the Liberal party but with gritted teeth. One woman told the *WSWS* that she had voted Liberal and had always done so, but was “turned off” by the GST which was meant to replace other taxes but hadn’t. “I’d like to see the Scoresby freeway built, we need hospitals and improvements to schools.”

Such is the alienation from the Howard government that the Liberal Party deliberately pitched its campaign to “local” issues in Aston, attempting to pin the blame for lack of services on the state Labor government. Howard, Treasurer Peter Costello and other senior Liberals took part in the campaign but the party’s leaflets, posters and how-to-vote cards made a point of not featuring Howard’s picture or the word “Liberal” but of focusing on their local candidate.

And for good reason. As one former Liberal voter told the *WSWS*: “You can’t trust people like Howard and Costello... Howard brought in the GST. Costello is a most terrible man. That grin of his, he is too smug. He says the economy is OK, but it is not for the little people. It is not OK for pensioners. Look at workers, who earn about \$350. They may as well stay at home, the dole [unemployment benefits] is not much less.”

Labor leader Beazley seized on the result to proclaim that “the government’s credibility is shot to pieces”. If the overall swing were repeated at the next federal election, Beazley said, “it would see the election of a Labor government with a 32-seat majority.” Seeking to minimise the smaller than expected swing to Labor, he claimed that the battleground in the next elections would not be in areas such as Aston, but in the “far outer suburbs of our capital cities and in the regions”.

What Beazley was dodging around, however, was the rather unpalatable fact that Labor’s primary vote had actually declined under conditions of deep hostility to the Howard government. A sizeable layer of voters took the opportunity of the by-election to protest against the Liberals but they did not cast their first preference for Labor. Many simply saw no difference between Liberal and Labor, which implemented the demands of big business for economic restructuring from 1984 to 1996 and oversaw severe cutbacks to government spending, rising unemployment and social inequality.

Labor’s campaign in Aston was a measure of the party’s abandonment of its old nostrums of social reform. Opposition leader Beazley, who invested a considerable amount of his personal time in the electorate, seemed at pains to prove nothing more than that, in the Australian vernacular, he was “a good bloke”—kissing babies, filling cars at petrol pumps and repeating the party’s two vague promises to “roll back” the GST and turn Australia into a “Knowledge Nation”.

The very emptiness of Labor’s campaign underscores the political dilemma facing all the parties—how to appeal to voters angry at the destruction of jobs, the lack of decent public hospitals, schools and transport, and declining living standards while at the same time demonstrating to the big business interests, to which they are beholden, that they will be “fiscally responsible” in

office.

Of the other 13 candidates, the Australian Democrats, a small ‘l’ liberal party oriented to sections of the middle class and small business, received 8.2 percent of the vote, marginally higher than in 1998 but below the party’s 1996 result. Its new leader, Natasha Stott Despoja, claimed the outcome was a vindication of her orientation—support for the Democrats had slumped after the previous leadership cut a deal with the Howard government to pass the GST in the upper house.

A significant segment of the vote went to so-called environmental candidates and parties. While the Greens only received 2.4 percent of the vote, local mayor Garry Scales, who campaigned on environmental issues, received 4.6 percent and the Liberal Party breakaway, Liberals for Forests, gained 1 percent. The extreme rightwing One Nation party, which obtained significant support in rural areas in the Queensland and West Australian state elections, gained just 1.8 percent.

The substantial vote for minor parties not only indicates the widespread disaffection with Labor and Liberal but the considerable underlying political confusion and volatility. One opinion poll taken just a day before the by-election found that almost a quarter of voters had not decided whom to vote for. If Australia did not have compulsory voting, a significant number of those may not have voted at all.

In the aftermath of the by-election, media focused nervously on the widening gulf between voters and the two major parties.

An editorial in the *Australian* entitled “Aston voters ring the alarm bells” warned: “[N]o matter how much spin is put on it, the result is dangerous. Many voters have turned away from the major parties, so we’re in for even more vote-buying and it will be open slather on preferences.” It called on Howard to halt to the Liberal Party’s porkbarrelling, saying that “people have seen through his limp attempts at vote-buying through petrol-excite cuts and road-building” and insisted that Beazley “spell out [his vision] and prove we can afford it.”

There are also fears in ruling circles that the break-up of the two-party system will lead to increasing political instability. In its editorial on Monday, Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper hinted at the risks: “Unrealistic expectations may be part of the reason for the level of voter disillusionment and apathy, but it is also clear that many people feel neither side is properly addressing their concerns. This is worrying, because the danger is always that frustrated voters will turn to extremist parties.”

The comment reflects a deep-going concern that the present political confusion and disorientation will give way to a more critical attitude among working people to the sources of the social problems they confront, which will inevitably lead to a questioning of the certitudes of the capitalist system itself.



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