

Howard versus Beazley

More unanimity than conflict in Australian election debate

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17 October 2001

Sunday night's election debate between Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Labor leader Kim Beazley was in name only. Billed as one of the election campaign's main events, the outcome was an unprecedented display of bipartisanship as the two leaders outlined a series of reactionary measures for cracking down on "illegal" immigrants, supporting the US war against Afghanistan and maintaining their pro-market economic agenda.

Howard insisted that the debate be held little more than a week after the November 10 election date was announced and before candidate nominations have even closed. Beazley, who wanted at least two debates, held later in the campaign, nevertheless acquiesced. Since neither party has officially launched its campaign, or released its policy details, neither leader was prepared to discuss any concrete policies. Moreover, Treasury papers revealing the state of the budget are not due out until later this week.

The debate's format, agreed to by both leaders, was designed to protect them from any unwelcome probing of their policies or record. TV personality, Ray Martin, selected as moderator, posed a few innocuous and general questions, allowing the two leaders to deliver largely pre-arranged speeches.

Liberal Party advisors had clearly instructed the Prime Minister to pursue his tactic of whipping up fears and insecurities about the international situation. He made at least 35 separate references to "challenging", "difficult", "massively difficult" or "unexpected" challenges facing Australia and "the civilised world" since the events of September 11.

Nevertheless, Howard's performance belied the image of the impregnable leader and powerful statesman carefully manufactured by his minders and the mass media in the aftermath of the terror attacks in the US on September 11. He appeared nervous and wooden, terrified of straying anywhere beyond the two themes that have, during the past eight weeks, catapulted the Liberal Party ahead of Labor in

opinion polls—the war on terrorism and anti-refugee chauvinism.

Prior to the *Tampa* affair at the end of August, when Howard ordered the navy to turn back a Norwegian vessel that had plucked hundreds of asylum seekers from a sinking boat in Australian waters, the Liberal government was destined for almost certain defeat, as a result of its ongoing attacks on jobs, wages, working conditions and social facilities, and its introduction of a highly regressive Goods and Services Tax.

For his part, the Labour leader took every available opportunity to align himself with Howard's appeals to patriotism and his support for the US war drive. "We have to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with George Bush and Tony Blair," he declared in his opening address. On at least 21 occasions Beazley emphasised his agreement with the Prime Minister.

When he did attack Howard, it was almost always from the right. This was most graphically demonstrated in the 25 minute exchange—nearly half the hour-long event—between the two leaders over which political party would best police the country's borders to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australia's shores.

The Royal Australian Navy was, according to Howard, the best means for dealing with the "thousands upon thousands more people wanting to arrive illegally into this country". Beazley disagreed. "Vigilance is the key," he declared. A national coast guard "to ensure that for 52 weeks of the year we are on watch" was the only way to stop "illegals". His most important credentials for the job of prime minister were, he argued, that he had spent five years as Defence Minister, and 11 years serving on national security committees.

An overseas visitor, accidentally tuning in, could well have thought he had stumbled on a forum sponsored by Janes Defence Weekly, as the opposition leader expounded on the various military and naval options for policing Australian

territorial waters. His proposed coast guard was, he said, like the American system, “You can recollect all of those stories of the Vietnam War. A lot of the brown water activities were done by the US coast guard in Vietnam.”

When Howard remarked that Australia had for a long time been considered a “soft touch” by illegal immigrants, Beazley was incensed. It was the Liberals who were “soft” as opposed to Labor, which, he boasted was “the party which put in place compulsory detention for people who came to this country illegally.”

Howard, he complained, had waited until the “213th boat under his regime” before the government finally sent in the navy—which Labor fully supported.

By the end of the debate, the purpose of the obscene concentration on anti-immigrant rhetoric was clear: to avoid any discussion of the intractable social problems affecting millions of ordinary working people.

Beazley, in an effort to win back traditional Labor voters, tried to make a certain populist appeal to the deep-going anti-market and anti-government sentiment that saw huge swings against the Liberals in several state elections earlier this year. He complained about policies that promoted “privilege” at the expense of “all Australians,” especially the federal government’s funding of elite private schools: “\$100 million plus is going to the old category one elite schools. Take a school like Kings. They’ve got 15 ovals, rifle ranges and all the rest. They don’t need money for a new one... We need money going into our government schools to make them better.”

He made no mention of the fact that Labor has supported the Howard government’s policy on education for the past three and half years—most recently, embracing its Socio-Economic Status funding formula which funnels tens of millions of dollars from the state school system into private education.

There were more sound bites: “We want a healthcare system that can be accessed with a Medicare card not a credit card.” This in spite of the fact that Labor has pledged to retain billions of dollars in rebates to the private health insurance companies, aimed at crippling the public health system.

Then more slogans: “We need to put the word ‘care’ back into aged care; We need job security and security for entitlements.”

The opposition leader refused to challenge Howard’s deceptive claims that wages were improving and that the Liberals had presided over job creation. The increase in average weekly earnings has only taken place because of skyrocketing incomes for the wealthiest 10 percent. Wages for the bottom 50 percent of the population have declined. Moreover, full-time jobs have been decimated, with the

majority of new “employment opportunities” being part-time and casual.

When asked, at the conclusion of the debate, what would be his greatest fear in the event of a Labor victory, Howard replied it was the prospect of “coast to coast Labor governments.” “And in those circumstances, to use the Australian vernacular, the boys and girls of the union movement and the union bosses would make whoopee...”

Beazley was at pains to offer his reassurances. “The PM’s fears are unfounded,” he replied.

Any fears that might be harboured by big business were also laid to rest. Beazley pledged himself to budgetary restraint and continued surpluses—making clear that no worker should expect from a Labor government any reversal of the cuts to government spending on public facilities. To emphasise the point, he attacked Howard for having eroded the latest surplus with \$20 billion worth of pre-election spending, comparing that with Labor’s economic record during its 13 years of rule between 1983 and 1996. Labor had “a lower level of public debt... than Maggie Thatcher’s Britain or Ronald Reagan’s US,” he bragged. If economic growth had occurred in the first years of the Howard government, this was “off the back of the painful reforms we put in place.”

According to the media, Beazley secured a decisive victory over Howard, with his winning masterstroke being a question posed in his final summing up. “I ask the Australian people this: Do you think you are better off now than five years ago?...Do you feel more secure?”

But Beazley failed to offer a single measure to address the decline in living standards and mounting sense of insecurity. As he himself pointed out, all of Howard’s “economic reforms”—the unrelenting attacks on jobs, wages and social facilities carried out since 1996—were pioneered by Labor governments in the 80s and 90s. The debate simply served to underscore the degree of unanimity between the two major parties on their anti-working class agenda.



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