

Australian election reveals the decay of parliamentary politics

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The Liberal-National Party government of Prime Minister John Howard was returned to office with a slightly increased parliamentary majority at last Saturday's election, handing the Labor Party its third successive defeat. While, on the surface, little has changed in electoral terms, the results reveal a political system in an advanced state of decay.

After a right-wing election campaign—dominated by bipartisan support for the US-led war on Afghanistan and the use of the navy to repel boatloads of asylum seekers—the votes for both major parties were at or near record lows.

The Liberal-National Coalition won only 42.8 percent of first preference votes, its worst result—with one exception—since the demise of the discredited McMahon government at the 1972 poll. The exception was the last election in 1998, in which Howard clung to office despite winning just 39.5 percent of the primary vote.

Led by Kim Beazley, Labor's vote plumbed even greater historic depths. Its primary vote of 38.4 percent was the lowest since the Scullin government disintegrated in 1931. The ALP's support has now fallen further since the landslide defeat of the Keating government in 1996, when its vote plunged to 38.7 percent after 13 years in office.

In New South Wales, the most populous state, and once regarded as an ALP stronghold, Labor's vote fell to 37.1 percent, its lowest since the election of 1906. In South Australia, where the ALP consistently won the majority of seats in the post-World War II period, its vote sank to 33 percent, the worst result in 70 years.

Labor's parliamentary numbers would have been seriously dented except for the fact that it suffered its heaviest losses in traditional working class areas, where its MPs enjoyed a bigger electoral buffer. The anti-Labor swing in western Sydney ranged from 4.4 to 7.7 percent, but was not enough to oust Labor MPs. In some key former Labor seats, however, such as Parramatta, Lindsay (Penrith) and Macarthur (Campbelltown-Camden), Liberal MPs entrenched their position.

On election night, Howard claimed his victory was an historic one. The Coalition, he said, had achieved the greatest swing of any government since 1966, when one of Howard's Liberal Party predecessors, Harold Holt, obtained a temporary fillip by pledging unconditional participation in the war against Vietnam. Howard's boast later proved to be false. The two-party-preferred swing from Labor to the Coalition was 1.38 percent, less than the last Labor prime minister Paul Keating won in 1993 by opposing a Goods and Services Tax (GST).

The result, in fact, marks a new milestone in the decline of popular support for the two traditional ruling parties. Of the valid ballots cast, 20 percent went to other parties and independents. This was despite the collapse of the vote for the extreme right-wing Pauline Hanson One Nation party, whose share tumbled from 8.4 percent to 4.3 percent. In effect, Howard increased the Liberal vote only by winning over people who voted for Hanson in 1998, largely by adopting Hanson's policy of turning back refugee boats.

Despite One Nation's decline in rural and regional areas, Howard's

country-based coalition partner, the National Party, lost several seats. New England, an electorate once held by the party's former leader, fell to an Independent. Another Independent retained a nearby central NSW seat and a National Party defector, Bob Katter, beat the party's candidate in his north Queensland seat. Another former National Party leader's seat remains in doubt. The Nationals may have only a rump of 12 MPs in the new House of Representatives, down from 16.

Among the other parties, the Greens doubled their vote to 4.2 percent. Their biggest gains came in inner-city electorates, where previous Labor voters—students, professional people and older workers—expressed disgust and outrage at the ALP's embrace of Howard's refugee-bashing. Appealing to younger voters, the Greens claimed to stand for a more humanitarian policy, while still backing the retention of immigration controls and quota restrictions. In the seat of Sydney, the Labor vote fell 9.2 percent, while the Greens' rose by 8.8 percent. For Melbourne, the figures were 10.6 percent and 10 percent respectively. In the Senate, the parliamentary upper house, the Greens' sole MP, Bob Brown, may be joined by two colleagues.

By contrast, the Australian Democrats, who sought to avoid taking any stance on the refugees and the war, could lose two or three Senators. Their vote stagnated, despite installing a new younger leader, Natasha Stott-Despoja, in a bid to overcome a dramatic drop in membership and support following their 1999 deal with the government to introduce the GST.

In the aftermath of the election, there has been a concerted attempt by the media, political commentators and the parties themselves to obscure the character of the election campaign and the significance of a vote that revealed widespread hostility to official politics as a whole.

Since claiming victory, Howard has sought to rewrite history by denying that his win was achieved by whipping up racist anti-refugee sentiment. He has come under fire from prominent figures in the business, media and political establishment for running a campaign that was socially divisive as well as damaging to the country's image in key Asian markets.

Howard's protestations are belied by the fact that the coalition focused its election propaganda in the last week of the campaign entirely on the refugee issue. On the final day, full page advertisements appeared in major newspapers featuring the prime minister's declaration, "we decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come".

This theme was the culmination of a year in which Howard, shaken by a string of state election losses, set about wooing One Nation voters. He spent more than \$20 billion on rural subsidies, fuel rebates, tax concessions and other handouts to small and medium-sized business. At the same time, he and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock stepped up their vilification of asylum seekers. When the cabinet decided in late August to bar entry to rescued refugees aboard the *Tampa*, and then established a naval cordon across the northern coast, the policy was simply escalated.

As for the Labor Party, it is attempting to ascribe its failure to win against a deeply unpopular government to a series of tactical errors on the

part of Beazley, who in conceding defeat on Saturday night also stood down as party leader.

On the issue of refugees, senior Labor figures now claim that the party abandoned its “principles” for electoral expediency. After keeping his mouth shut throughout the campaign, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron accused ALP leaders of pandering to racism and “betraying the core working principles of the Labor Party”. Labor frontbencher Duncan Kerr said Labor had to return to “common values of fairness and decency”.

Beazley and his advisers were, however, standing on Labor principles and policy. The framework for the Howard government’s treatment of asylum seekers, including mandatory detention in remote holding centres and draconian refugee laws, was established by previous Labor governments. The ALP is deeply imbued with the “White Australia” racism on which party was founded and which prevailed as official policy in Australia for most of the 20th century.

The myth is also being propagated that Labor was defeated by its own election tactics. According to this argument, the ALP leaders failed to launch their policies until too late, leaving insufficient time for “product differentiation” during the campaign, and they were then swamped by the *Tampa* crisis, followed by the fallout from the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The truth is that Labor’s policies were known well in advance, but they were practically indistinguishable from the Liberals’. Since the last election in 1998 there has been a bipartisan approach on virtually every issue, including on education and health where Labor claimed to offer an alternative. More than 12 months ago, Beazley committed a Labor government to retaining the key features of Howard’s policies which funnel billions of dollars into private schools and health insurance at the expense of public education and hospitals. Labor’s election promises, which amounted to a pittance spread out over a number of years, convinced few voters.

Particular attention has been paid to the decline of Labor’s vote in the outer western suburbs of Sydney, which have traditionally been regarded as ALP heartland. Two contradictory explanations have been offered.

The first puts the outcome down to ingrained racial prejudice among workers. Writing in the *Australian Financial Review*, Geoffrey Barker contended that “the Prime Minister’s exploitation of the issues showed yet again his powerful instinct for the darker, racist recesses of the Australian mind... the blue collar workers, especially in NSW, backed the Coalition because of Howard’s stand against asylum seekers”.

The second is that Labor failed to adapt itself to the “aspirational” voters, particularly in Sydney. Labor and Liberal spin doctors alike have joined media pundits in painting a picture of burgeoning middle class wealth in former Labor electorates across western Sydney and in other outer metropolitan areas.

Both images are false. It is not ingrained racism but definite political and economic processes that have been at work in Sydney’s outer west. Median incomes may be higher than the national average but many of the young families in these areas are on a financial knife-edge as a result of huge mortgages due to Sydney’s astronomical land and housing values. Their difficulties have been compounded by the lack of decent public services and constant fear of unemployment and any hike in interest rates.

Both Labor and Liberal have preyed on the fears and economic insecurities among these layers by actively promoting anti-immigrant racism to deflect attention from the impact of their own policies, or lack of them. Well before Howard seized on the *Tampa* affair, NSW Labor Premier Bob Carr was witchhunting immigrant communities, accusing them of spawning “ethnic gangs” of thugs and rapists as part of his law and order drive to boost police powers.

The election outcome simply shows that if the most hard-pressed layers of society, including workers, small business people and ruined farmers,

are given no progressive alternative—no program to tackle the glaring polarisation of society—some are susceptible to right-wing chauvinism. In this election, voters were presented with a stark lack of choice.

None of the post-election commentary has addressed the deepening social divide between rich and poor that lies at the root of the degeneration of the major parties and the whole façade of parliamentary politics. It is no accident that Liberal and Labor stood in the election on an identical rightwing platform. Neither of these two big business parties have any solutions to the deepening social and economic problems that have been generated by two decades of market reform under successive Liberal and Labor governments.

With the election out of the way, editorial writers have wasted no time in instructing the Howard government that it must step up the pace of economic restructuring. “Now the election campaign is over, the government must not return to the pattern of the past year, when policy backflips, costly handouts and retreat from economic liberalisation dominated,” declared the *Australian*. “Instead, it needs to get energised again about reform. This is the only chance of ensuring we remain secure as a confident, outward-looking, economically dynamic nation in spite of the treacherous global circumstances.”

Under the headline: “Howard must get on with it,” the *Australian Financial Review* warned that the economy had not been fire-proofed against “what is increasingly becoming a global recession”. With the election over, Howard and his advisers had to “assess the economic outlook and determine policies in a more sober environment”. If Howard does not deliver the agenda required by corporate Australia, he could soon face demands to make way for Treasurer Peter Costello, who is the favourite of the financial markets.

Faced with the prospect of a severe global downturn, the government will rapidly intensify the offensive against the working class. Howard has already reassured big business that his government will not be limited to specific election promises, declaring: “Plainly, you have a mandate to implement things that are consistent with your philosophy.” In one of his first decisions, Howard has demanded cuts in pay and conditions for Ansett airline workers. With major companies axing thousands of jobs and unemployment already over 7 percent, major class conflicts lie ahead.

Yet, the poll has revealed a political system that is already fragile, highly volatile and unable to command popular support. Far from auguring calm and stability, the election has set the stage for a period of profound political turbulence and upheaval.



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