

Australian election: a bizarre five-week campaign

The Editorial Board
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Australians go to the polls today after a five-week campaign that has been like no other in living memory. Official politics has shifted so far to the right and is so divorced from the lives and concerns of the vast majority of working people that the campaign has taken on a bizarre, even surreal character.

The two leaders—Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley—have run a presidential-style campaign, even though parliament is based on the British Westminster system. Voters cast their ballots not for these two individuals but for candidates in 150 lower house seats and for upper house party slates in six states and two territories. Yet none of the ministers or shadow ministers, let alone ordinary MPs and their challengers, have rated more than an occasional reference in the media.

The entire focus has been on Howard and Beazley, whose every line, word and gesture has been choreographed and rehearsed by a small army of minders, pollsters, publicists and organisers. With no fundamental difference between Liberal and Labor on any major issue, the preoccupation of party strategists has been to exploit gaffes, invent clever one-liners, and, in the last week, to cast personal slurs—anything that will give the party an edge in the opinion polls.

Every morning, rival teams of spin-doctors pore over detailed media reports to work out the line for the day. The purpose is not to explain issues but to score points. As one practitioner told the *Australian*: “The secret is to identify what story, which may or may not begin early in the morning, is going to survive until [the] 6 o’clock [evening news]”. A “good day” is when one’s opponent is left groping for answers in front of TV cameras or the poll ratings get a slight lift.

Both sides have unashamedly played on nationalism and White Australia racism. Howard initially seized on the war against Afghanistan with great enthusiasm, calculating that he could strut the stage as a “tested leader” for “uncertain and troubled times”—a phrase he repeated ad nauseum. But after pollsters discovered that the war was not hugely popular, Howard has all but dropped the issue, figuring it is not the “winner” he first thought. Beazley has rapidly followed suit along with the press, which has relegated coverage of the events in Afghanistan to the back pages.

Since then, the Liberals have concentrated their efforts on demonstrating that they will stop at nothing to prevent “boat people” from reaching Australian shores. In the final week of the campaign, the party has saturated electorates with leaflets bearing Howard’s photograph and the line which won the greatest applause during his campaign launch: “We will decide who comes to the country and the circumstances in which they come.”

Not to be outdone, Beazley has stood 110 percent behind every statement on the war and refugees uttered by Howard and his ministers. Nearly half of the first and only televised debate between the two leaders was taken up with the issue of asylum seekers and Beazley’s insistence that Labor had not wavered in supporting the government’s draconian

new measures. Any hint of dissent within Labor’s ranks on either issue has been quickly squashed.

Labor claims to have the advantage over the government on domestic issues such as education and health but neither party offers any solution to the huge social problems facing millions of people. Determined to meet the demands of big business for “fiscal responsibility,” both parties have limited their election promises to tiny amounts of money targetted at small groups of voters. The purpose of these “micro-policies,” which will cost little and remedy nothing, is to bribe enough voters in specific electorates to get the party across the line.

Virtually no-one would have noticed, or perhaps more accurately would have cared, if the two parties had simply swapped all their various election promises halfway through the campaign. To create the impression of a difference, Beazley ended every election advertisement with the empty phrase “that’s what I stand for”—underscoring the fact that he cannot discuss the agenda he really stands for, which is indistinguishable from Howard’s.

The artificial character of the campaign underscores the complete disconnect between official policies and the lives of the majority of people.

The government has deliberately targetted its anti-refugee xenophobia at those social layers, particularly in rural and regional areas, that have been uprooted and left vulnerable by the processes of economic restructuring. Adopting the program of the extreme rightwing Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party, both Liberal and Labor cynically prey on fears and insecurities, which their own policies have been responsible for creating, to blame immigrants for the lack of jobs and services.

But even this issue has produced a backlash among significant sections of the population who are deeply repulsed by the inhumane policy of turning away boatloads of desperate refugees. Lacking any official avenue of expression, the opposition has taken the form of letters to the editor, comments on radio, and protests including meetings of several hundreds in traditionally conservative areas.

The simple truth is that both parties scapegoat refugees because they are unable to address the concerns of the majority of people. Indeed, throughout the campaign neither Howard nor Beazley has gone anywhere near ordinary voters. The old image of the leader on the hustings, fighting for policies and taking on all comers, is a thing of the past—along with political rallies, street meetings and mingling with the public. The campaign launches, interviews and photo-opportunities have all been stage-managed and scripted affairs involving handpicked audiences and pre-selected individuals.

As one media wit commented ironically: “It is possible to imagine that this campaign could have been held in two rooms. Howard, perhaps, could have occupied one in Sydney; Beazley could have stayed close to home in Perth. In these rooms, the two leaders could have given their speeches, held their press conferences, undertaken their TV and radio interviews. Carefully chosen audiences could have been bussed in for the big

moments. And each day, an adjoining studio could have been decked out as a preschool centre or an old folks' home, complete with babies for kissing and aged citizens for a hug. Few Australians would know the difference, because... neither Beazley nor Howard has exposed himself to ordinary Australians."

On the rare occasions that the cordon sanitaire has been breached it has invariably left the political leaders flailing. A heckler in the city of Launceston called Howard "a warmonger," evoking a panic-stricken response. The press spent the next day dissecting the "crisis" in the Liberal camp. When a pensioner exclaimed on a radio talkback show that it was impossible to live because of the government's Goods and Services Tax (GST), Howard was unable to answer.

So brittle and uncertain is the support for the major parties that no debate whatsoever can be tolerated, even on the two issues at the centre of the campaign—the war and refugees. In New South Wales (NSW), Labor MP Peter Knott cautiously made the point last week that America's policies in the Middle East had "come back to bite it". Despite the fact that he supports the war against Afghanistan and Australia's military involvement, Knott was threatened with disendorsement and forced to recant. In Western Australia, Liberal MP Julie Bishop faced similar treatment after tentatively suggesting that more refugees should be allowed into Australia.

So extensive is the disengagement with the campaign that a number of political pundits have begun to express concerns about what it signifies. All of them point to the complete bipartisanship of the campaign, the lack of any serious debate and the gulf between the parties and ordinary voters. But none of them pose, let alone answer, the question: why? No one refers to the unprecedented growth of social inequality over the last two decades and the huge chasm between rich and poor that has opened up.

A blunt editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* on Tuesday entitled "The election takes nation to a political low point" castigated both Howard and Beazley for their lack of ideas, policy or vision. "We have two overscripted, backward-looking leaders who wouldn't risk coming up with a creative idea or policy reform any more than they'd risk showing some leadership on just how Australia should make its way in the world..."

"We have to ask, are we getting value for the money we have invested in the political system and the political oligopolies that have come to dominate? And we have to answer that the politicians and their fixers are taking our money, hijacking our democracy, stifling debate and treating voters with contempt. This has been a fake campaign between two politicians whose stance is the same on key issues and so close on others that they pretend to find points of difference."

The editorial went on to berate Howard: "Had the government not unconscionably manufactured a boatpeople crisis and played to base instincts by adopting the Hanson agenda as its own, and if the September 11 terrorists attacks had not shocked so many Australians into intolerance and insularity, then where would John Howard be? What would he be standing on? Nothing, other than the past and denial about the needs of the future."

The *Australian* was just as scathing about Beazley and the second-line leaders in both parties. While the article purports to speak for the man in the street, it in fact expresses the views of the most powerful sections of big business who are exasperated with the failure of either party to outline a program to accelerate free market reforms. Its attack on Howard for his "unconscionable" exploitation of the refugee issue reflects deep concerns that by pandering to White Australia racism, Liberal and Labor are irreparably damaging Australian economic and strategic interests in Asia.

Over the past week, a string of senior Liberal and Labor figures and former top public officials have lashed Beazley and Howard for their stance on immigration. Former Liberal leader John Hewson declared last week: "If Howard wins the election... it will be the victory of prejudice over policy". John Menadue, former head of the Prime Minister's

Department, said: "This is not strong leadership, to attack vulnerable, outcast, weak people. It is cowardice." Just two days before the poll, the *Sydney Morning Herald* featured 14 of these critics on the front page of its Thursday edition.

Taken together with the *Australian* editorial, these remarks reflect a profound dissatisfaction among a section of the ruling class with both the traditional parties. Howard's agenda appeals to less competitive sections of business who welcome his anti-immigrant measures as a sign that economic protectionism will not be completely abandoned. But these policies cut directly across the interests of more globally integrated layers of the bourgeoisie, like Murdoch, who are trenchantly opposed to any retreat into national insularity.

While Murdoch and company want to fashion a new nationalism more in tune with their interests in Asia and the world, both wings of the ruling class agree that the burden of economic restructuring and reform must be imposed on working people. The particular form taken by this election campaign, which has blocked any popular discussion or involvement, has as its content this fundamental divide between the needs and aspirations of the majority of people and the agenda of the ruling elite.

Broad layers of working people feel a deep sense of disgust and frustration at the lack of any party that expresses their needs and interests. No one believes either party or their election promises.

Given that voting is compulsory, millions of ballots will be cast today for the major parties. But the whole process is a hollow façade. Neither party enjoys the positive or enthusiastic support of any significant layer of the population. Insofar as voters support one party it is largely because they are more hostile to the other. Politically conscious layers of workers, who have always regarded the Liberals as a big business party, feel even greater antagonism towards Beazley, whom they view as a traitor.

The present situation did not emerge overnight but is the culmination of protracted processes. Over the past two decades, the working class and substantial sections of the middle class have seen their social position continuously eroded by declining real wages, the loss of full-time jobs and hard-won conditions and a marked deterioration in all social services, including public education, health, welfare and housing. For millions of people, the daily struggle to survive consumes all of their time and energy.

In the sphere of politics, there is now a lengthy history of bitter experiences with the lies and broken promises of a succession of Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal levels. All the attempts to pressure those in power through protests and strikes or by voting for independent or minor parties have come to naught. There is widespread disgust not simply with Labor and Liberal but with the entire political establishment, including the media, political pundits and public officials.

These sentiments have produced a string of election debacles for the Liberal-National coalition in Western Australia and Queensland, the Ryan by-election and more recently in the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Support for the Liberals and their pro-market policies dropped dramatically, but Labor failed to make any significant gains. It only won office on the basis of preferences. Around 30 percent of the electorate gave their first preference vote to other parties and to independents. As one commentator summed up the situation: what exists out there is "a quietly seething electorate."

The latest opinion polls indicate that the gap between the government and opposition has narrowed. But the very basis of the measure—two-party preferred, or the probable vote after the distribution of preferences—ignores the fact that at least a third of voters will not give their first preference to either major party. Old political loyalties are breaking down and new ones are yet to form. So volatile is the situation that a landslide for the government or for Labor, or a closely fought result hinging on a handful of votes, would come as no surprise.

The election represents a turning point. Whatever the outcome, the agenda of the next government will be dictated by the historic shift in

international events—the US-led war in Afghanistan and growing signs of worldwide recession—which will lead to a clamouring in ruling circles for even more aggressive attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of the working people.

Workers cannot afford to sit on the political sidelines. It is necessary to draw the political lessons from the experiences through which the working class has passed in Australia and internationally and build a new mass party committed to an alternative socialist and internationalist program.



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