

Interviews with voters on the Australian election

Our correspondents
17 November 2001

The *World Socialist Web Site* sent a number of reporting teams on November 10 to polling booths in various suburbs—both working class and middle class—in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle. Their interviews provide some interesting insights into the shifts in political thinking among voters.

Unlike in previous election campaigns, there was little discussion or political banter as people lined up to vote. Voters tended to brush past supporters of the major parties refusing to take how-to-vote cards or screwing them up in disgust. But when we spoke to people leaving the booths, they were willing to discuss the political issues. They were appreciative of the opportunity to talk after a five-week campaign in which neither political parties nor the media addressed any of their concerns.

A significant number of people strongly opposed the Liberal-National coalition and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposition over their bipartisan support for the US-led war against Afghanistan and the government's use of the navy against boatloads of refugees—the two issues at the centre of the campaign. They expressed concern that there was no avenue to voice their opinions, that the media was lying to them and that democratic rights were under attack.

A young worker, Nick, in the inner Sydney suburb of Marrickville, said: "The war in Afghanistan is horrendous. The richest country in the world is pounding the poorest country in the world. There's more bin Ladens being trained right now through the actions of America. We've got ASIO [the Australian intelligence agency] going into peoples' houses in areas like Lakemba [a Sydney suburb with a large Arabic community] and interrogating people—that's not democracy. Democracy is freedom of speech."

One young student leaving a polling booth in Newcastle, when asked what she thought about events in Afghanistan said, "I think it is just like that," pointing towards a huge Rottweiler dog, straining on its leash to attack a small silky terrier. "I am disgusted by what is being done in Afghanistan," she continued, "and I don't think it has anything to do with fighting terrorism. How can bombing a whole nation have anything to do with stopping what happened in the US? It will cause more problems."

At Eastwood in Sydney, Roger, a middle-aged professional,

said: "Basically I voted Liberal all my life, until pretty much now. We're sickened by the way the Liberal government has tried to keep asylum seekers out. People coming here should receive proper treatment. For example, someone who still has family overseas and wants to go and visit them and has status here as a refugee, cannot come back. We think this [is] a bit like the Nazis."

But when he went on to explain what a "good spot" Australia was, Loris, his wife, made the point that "freedom of speech is starting to disappear." And after a discussion about the way in which figures like boxer Tony Mundine had been silenced for criticising Australian involvement in the war, Roger recalled that a Labor MP had been forced to retract statements about the war. "Does it mean that no political party in Australia allows you to think your own way? Boo to that."

In Melbourne, a woman opposed the refugee policy, saying: "Australia is a big country. I don't think people should die because the government is worried about welfare money. The refugees are not coming here because they want to, but because they have to—because they can't afford food or because they are afraid for their families. People are jumping off boats because they want to live. Australia is murdering them in a way. It is only allowing them to die. I find that appalling."

David, a student studying politics and law, voted for the first time last Saturday. He told us: "As a citizen who wants to be informed I resent the fact there was only one debate. I also think there has been a lot of distraction from the true issues. They've played upon jingoistic issues. I think Howard has been trying to harness back the One Nation vote by his stance on immigration. I was disgusted how the *Tampa* refugees were treated.

"I think in Australia's political environment no issue receives the discussion it deserves. There is a basic lack of long-term vision in the major parties. I view the Labor Party as the Liberals trying to capture the workers' vote and the Democrats as a centre party with a bad sense of balance. I don't expect much of Labor. On health and education I still expect Labor to be more left-wing than the Liberals, but I don't expect any solutions to the problems. I don't know how many politicians I believe these days.

"I can't think of any influential political or policy group in

Australia that draws its views from the working class. The trade unions have become part of the status quo and the working class doesn't have any articulate voice. Democracy here isn't very healthy. We need parties with different perspectives because the status quo has been entrenched for so long these people don't know how to think outside of it."

Overall there was a mood of resentment and disgust—the product of bitter experiences with successive Labor and Liberal governments over the last two decades. Many people were concerned at the extent of social inequality and the failure of any of the parties to deal with the growing crisis confronting health care, education, aged care and the environment.

Mine, a nurse working in a Melbourne public hospital, explained: "I voted Labor, but I was very undecided. I was thinking of voting independent. I've always voted Labor and it was only at the last minute that I decided not to change my vote. The Liberals are not doing anything for us, they're only helping the rich. The health system is a mess and it worsens by the day. The waiting lists are getting out of control. There are not enough nurses and there are not enough beds.

"Even before the Liberals came in though, there has been a problem with public health. That's why I'm disappointed about Labor, but they're at least promising to have a look at that field. But both the main parties are pretty much the same. They don't have any policies to help families. They are just copying each other and they are both copying Pauline Hanson [leader of the rightwing, anti-immigrant One Nation party]."

Contradictions abounded. People told us who they voted for. But when asked why, or after we pointed out that party's policy, they would turn around and say—"yes I know"—or, in some cases, roundly denounce the party they had chosen.

Maha in Melbourne told us she had voted Liberal because she was "not confident in a change". But then she railed against the government's social policies for only benefiting "those who have more money" and criticised the war in Afghanistan as the United States trying "to remain the powerful country on earth". Peter, a Labor-voting student in the Sydney suburb of Greenacre, opposed the introduction of university fees by the ALP, declaring "you pay so much money and you don't even get a fair education".

Little remains of working class partisanship for Labor or even the notion that the party constitutes a "lesser evil" than the conservatives. In the working class suburbs we met some who said, with no particular enthusiasm, that they had voted Labor because they were "true believers", or because the ALP was "for the workers" or "for the migrants". But few expected much from a Labor government and none positively recalled any aspect of its 13-year rule from 1983 to 1996. No one *argued* in favour of voting for Labor.

This attitude to Labor was apparent in the demeanor of its polling booth workers. Many gave the impression they simply did not want to be there. A WSWS correspondent in Newcastle observed: "There was a tense atmosphere among ALP workers.

When I went to vote, I spoke to one. He said he did not agree with the war, or the stand on asylum seekers. Immediately, his team leader came over and ended the conversation. She was extraordinarily belligerent, putting herself between me and the other man."

In the Sydney suburb of Eastwood, we noticed that the only Labor supporter actively campaigning was handing out how-to-vote cards and saying "save our international reputation"—a rather obvious attack on the Howard government's use of the navy to block refugees. She came over to us, complaining that other ALP officials had insisted she stop. When we pointed out that Labor was in full agreement with Howard's policy, she replied, "I know, it is disgusting," and kept campaigning with the same slogan.

A number of workers felt that Labor had betrayed them.

In the industrial city of Newcastle, a former steelworker told us, calmly but with a sense of disgust: "Jobs have been a big question in this area but I am not surprised about Labor being quiet. They all promised they were going to do something [when the BHP steelworks closed]. They all came up here, including [Labor leader] Beazley. But at the end of the day the steel industry has gone and all the promises of other employment never meant anything."

A woman in Sydney's outer western suburb of Macquarie Fields was typical. When asked why she had voted for one of the smaller parties rather than Labor, the woman replied: "They're basically the Liberals these days. They're in each other's pockets."

"Do you see any difference between them?"

"No, very little. They're there for the rich, the Packers, the Murdochs. The working class hasn't really existed in this election. We've been forgotten and that's on purpose. It's because they've got no policies for the working class. That's the bottom line. They've just got nothing to offer us."

Taken as a whole, the interviews point to a considerable ferment. Hostility to the major parties is widespread, the old loyalties are breaking up and a significant layer of people are looking for explanations and alternatives.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact