

Interviews with Wollongong voters

“People are a lot more aware”

Our reporters
25 October 2002

The World Socialist Web Site interviewed voters last Saturday at three of the largest polling booths in the Cunningham by-election: Wollongong Central, where significant numbers of students and professional people voted, together with workers and unemployed; Figtree, one of Wollongong's western suburbs, where workers and their families predominated; and Corrimal East, in northern Wollongong, which includes a large public housing estate.

At Wollongong Central, we barely found a Labor voter; nearly all were voting Green, including lifetime Labor voters. In Figtree, many were voting Labor, but often without conviction. At Corrimal East, there was a mixture of both trends, but it was noticeable that long-time Labor supporters were voting Green. At each location, there was widespread opposition or misgivings about the planned war on Iraq, as well as disenchantment with Labor. The general atmosphere was quite political, with many people welcoming indications that Labor would lose the seat for the first time in 52 years.

Chris Page and Nadine Luckman, both urban planners, had decided to change their votes from Labor. Nadine remarked: “Labor has taken Wollongong for granted.” Chris added: “People are starting to look outside the traditional vote. People are a lot more aware; they are prepared to say a lot more.”

Asked to comment on the war, Nadine said: “This war on Iraq is very selective. There are plenty of other states—half a dozen at least—that have similar weapons. If Saddam Hussein wasn't sitting on oil, we wouldn't be in there.” Chris agreed: “In the media here, we only ever hear Bush, Blair and Howard. They are not here to represent us. To send troops off to war is a big issue, but they will do it without consulting us.”

Chris expressed the hope that the Greens would somehow “cause a shakeup” of the political system by becoming “the largest minor party”. Nadine commented: “I am concerned about stopping greenhouse gas emissions, protecting the escarpment and water supplies. If Michael Organ (Greens) goes to parliament, he will put his hand up on issues like Kyoto and improving rail and public transport.”

Connie Djekic, a retired retail worker, said she had always voted Labor in the past but had now voted for the Greens because of the high unemployment in Wollongong and her concerns about the war.

“The US should stick its nose out of it, and John Howard should stop jumping to the US blackmail. The US is provoking the conflict. They could have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein in the last war, if he was their real concern. They want to boost their economy. Bush and the Americans have caused trouble everywhere. They are not intervening in Africa, but only where there is oil and other interests.

“We need a change. People want a change. This will not be a vote for the Liberals or John Howard.”

Tanya Rajaratnam, a Wollongong University science/arts student, who is also working three jobs to survive, said she was glad to see a shift in the political climate.

“War is a big issue. The major parties have lost support on the war. Most Australians don't want a war. Bush and Howard are looking for someone to blame. They seized upon Al Qaeda because no one else has taken responsibility for the Bali bomb blasts. Their reactions will only encourage terrorism.

“War is about power. The US is worried that its global power is not as strong as it used to be. Islam has become a scapegoat for so much unrest in the world. It is not so much about religion as political and economic problems.”

The US Embassy's request for interviews with candidates to discuss their attitude to the war had only made her more suspicious about the motives behind the war.

“So much money is being spent on intelligence gathering when there are so many other problems in the world. So much money is being spent on a non-existent war on terrorism. They are spending huge amounts of money on it, when they have caused so much poverty around the world.

“People are starting to change their ideas. They are starting to think about the future. It's a positive sign. I see Labor as a less rightwing Liberal Party; I don't see much of a difference.”

A middle-aged worker commented that his ideas had become “a bit too left wing” for the Labor Party. Asked why he thought Labor had done nothing to improve health, education and social conditions over the previous decades, he said: “I don't know. The unions are very right-wing these days. Maybe it is their agenda. Labor and the Liberals are so alike. I think that is why there is such a protest vote against Labor.”

Debbie, a disability pensioner from Austinmer, said the main issues for her were “Jobs, jobs for our area. There's a lot of

unemployment down here.” She ridiculed Mark Latham’s claim that a vote for the Greens would threaten jobs. “It was just bully tactics. They’re getting a bit desperate.”

Cip, a former rigger at the steelworks, now unemployed, is married with a young son. He said Labor leaders had always taken Wollongong for granted, thinking that people would never vote against them. “But now you’re seeing a change. You’ve got a younger generation, like myself. If Labor loses the seat maybe it’s a good thing.”

He was not certain about the Greens but also expressed the hope that they would cause a “shake up”. “I’m not saying that the next party’s going to be any better but at least it will wake the Labor Party up, make them see that we’re getting sick of being mistreated. Everything’s getting taken out of Wollongong, there’s always unemployment, there’s always crime, but there’s nothing being done. That’s what eats me.”

He strongly opposed any attack on Iraq. “There’s no need for Australia to go to Iraq and there’s no need for America to go there. They had their chance back in Kuwait. If they really wanted him [Saddam Hussein], they would have got him. They don’t want to stop Saddam. What’s this big issue over Saddam now? They haven’t even got Bin Laden. What’s happened with him? It’s been over a year now.”

John and Debbie have lived in Figtree for many years. John said: “Look I’ll be honest with you, I’m a Liberal voter, but I went the Greens this time for a change. Because maybe they’ll stand up, whereas if it’s a Labor MP, they’re not going to rattle the chain too much are they?”

What issues needed standing up on, we asked. “Well hospitals, for example, and employment. I’ve got young kids, what are they going to do? They’re just everyday issues.”

On the “war against terrorism,” John said: “They say that Bush wants to keep his oil buddies happy back in Texas. I think the Iraqi thing is oil-driven. If you took the oil out of there, what would they do? It comes down to greed. There are plenty of places in the world where there’s fighting going on, in Africa for example, but they have nothing to offer, no oil or gas or mining deposits.”

Lawrence Gerada, a self-employed civil engineer in the construction industry, voted Labor because it was the best party to “bring the investors back” to Wollongong, and “get the building industry going”.

Gerada, who was driving a Mercedes sports car, said Labor had delivered in the past for the Illawarra region, but had been shattered by internal bickering and corruption scandals surrounding the former Labor Lord Mayor, George Harrison.

He also commented on the anti-war sentiment. “It is a touchy issue. We should sit back a little and not be so gung-ho. I don’t think that going in will right anything. What is this war all about? Power, oil, control? Bali has made a lot of people upset. In this area, 99.9 percent of people are anti-war.”

A contract labourer in the Port Kembla steelworks said he had voted Labor all his life but was now disillusioned. He expressed

bitterness about Labor’s cuts to workers compensation. “Maybe Labor is not doing its job. Are any of the parties doing their jobs, or just getting votes? They promise this and that, but don’t deliver. They are like car yard salesmen.”

Asked about the war, he said: “Everybody’s scared. We have one of the luckiest countries in the world, but all around the world, people are being blown up. In every country, some people seem to be living high on the hog but others are starving to death, while governments are spending money on nuclear weapons and defence. What has happened to normal human beings? The money should be going to help ordinary people instead.

“I voted Greens because I want to see more trees growing. I might be doing the wrong thing, because the Greens might not be doing their job either, but unique forests that have taken thousands of years to grow are being torn down for chipwood. The richer countries can go into other countries where they have power over the people and cut down their lifelines for greed.”

Dee, a beauty therapist, had lost a relative in the Bali bombing. By switching her vote from Labor to Green, she hoped to send a message of “basically no war”.

She said Prime Minister Howard was trying to make excuses for why the government did not pass on intelligence warnings about the dangers in Bali. “And as far as who did the bombing, it could have been anyone but automatically of course, because of September 11, everyone points the finger straight away.”

Dee said there were other motives driving the Bush administration and the Howard government, adding that she feared “another Gallipoli,” where young Australian soldiers were sent to fight and be killed in World War I. “It’s pretty sad to look ahead and see the threat of another war.”

She was disillusioned with Labor in general. “Labor hasn’t been giving people what they’ve wanted for a long time, mainly with jobs. There are promises after promises but no action. If you haven’t got an apprenticeship after school then there’s not much around.”



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