

Victorian voters interviewed:

Alienation from Labor despite its apparent landslide

Our reporters
5 December 2002

WSWS teams interviewed voters at polling booths in five urban working class electorates during last Saturday's Victorian state election. At every location, people expressed broad concerns about the decline in social facilities and living standards, as well as the threatened war against Iraq and the whipping up of racist and anti-refugee sentiment. While Labor won its largest ever parliamentary majority, the interviews revealed an underlying unease about the direction of the political system as a whole. In a number of instances, those voting Labor expressed deep reservations about its policies. Green voters voiced hostility to major parties and opposition to war, even though the Greens barely mentioned the war throughout the four-week campaign.

The Melbourne electorate, which covers the central city and its immediate northern fringes, is home to older immigrant families from many different countries, mixed with professionals and students. The election results saw a 12 percent swing against Labor and nearly 15 percent against Liberal, with the Greens gaining just over 23 percent of the vote.

At North Melbourne primary school, a young woman lawyer, who voted Green, voiced opposition to the treatment of asylum seekers and the recent violent police and intelligence raids on Indonesian-born Muslims. "The main issue for me is democratic rights. I'm against the attacks on non-citizens. What is happening is appalling—it shows what happens when you don't have a decent leadership and a decent media."

She condemned the federal Liberal government, and its Labor opposition, for using the terrorist actions in the United States and Bali to prey upon a sense of insecurity. "Governments are fueling these fears about security—using this against minority groups and allowing asylum seekers to be locked up."

She denounced Labor for continuing to back the Howard government's policies in the wake of Labor's defeat at last year's federal election. "I am ex-Labor. Labor missed a

great opportunity in 2001 to rethink the whole crisis in the ALP [Australian Labor Party], to make them an alternative to the Liberals. It is up to the ALP to show leadership, to do something about it, but they haven't."

Neil, a state library worker, voted for an ex-Labor independent, because he knew him as a councillor. He was also influenced by Labor's attack on the local parkland, and did not trust Labor Premier Steve Bracks: "I think they've called the election early, because something is coming up that they don't want to let us know."

He commented bitterly that the Bracks government continued to run-down public services. "I have worked at the State Library of Victoria for 16 years but my salary is only \$30,000. We've been corporatised, but our pay hasn't kept up with public service pay increases. Also, we have big problems with staffing, because the Labor government has capped it. When the new reading rooms are opened, we will be 100 staff hours short, and they've said, it's up to the staff to stretch our rosters."

"I don't like the idea of war. I have some friends from Iraq—Muslim boys. The State Library has many different nationalities and we work together without trouble. My Iraqi friends hate the US government, but not the American people. They have lost family and friends from bombing in Iraq already."

Richmond is another inner-city electorate with a mixture of post-World War II immigrants, professionals and students, as well as unemployed and pensioners. Labor's vote fell 8 percent, while the Liberals lost 11.4 percent, with the Greens achieving their highest result—27.4 percent.

Patrick, an Irish unemployed storeman, voted Labor, yet without a great deal of conviction. Bracks was "a nice man, with integrity" but he had remained silent on the treatment of refugees. "Labor is much preferable to the Tories, but I didn't vote for the ALP at the federal election because of the asylum seeker policy—I voted Green. Before that, I always voted Labor. The ALP is scared in case they offend the

xenophobes and racists. The shock jocks espouse those views and I loathe them.”

Cathy, a single pensioner, voted Labor because of her concern about the education of her 16-year-old son. She saw Labor as offering better conditions in education and health, but held out little hope for any substantial improvement. “Whichever government is in, it will take a hell of a lot to get health and education back on track.

“I worry about my son’s future education. He wants to go to university. Is he going to have the opportunity? For people like us on low incomes, it’s not fair if you’ve got the intelligence but you can’t get in... It’s always the big people who get there—money makes money.”

St Albans, an outer western working class suburb, with younger families and a diverse immigrant population, was split into two new electorates by a recent redistribution. Both seats recorded strong Labor votes—75 percent in Derrimut and 69 percent in Kororoit—with informal votes of 7 and 6 percent, twice the state average. Our interviews reflected anti-Liberal hostility and traditional family support for Labor, combined with misgivings.

Belinda, a computer operator voted Labor, as did her entire family. Her mother joked that it was a family tradition, enforced by her father. “Health is an important issue,” Belinda commented. “I used to work for the Royal District Nursing Service and we were swamped by new referrals that the hospitals couldn’t look after. I don’t vote for small parties or independents, because I don’t see them governing.”

Nevertheless, Belinda was disturbed by the “war against terrorism”. “The raids against immigrant groups are a legal form of social engineering. My husband is from India—look at the trouble between Pakistan and India. They could say anybody from there is a terrorist. It is very depressing, that is all I can say.”

Pat, a storeman, voted Labor but admitted that, “I don’t know any of their policies. The parties just have pictures of the candidates on their how-to-vote cards. They don’t state their policies.”

Dorothy voted Green. “I voted on the asylum seekers’ issue,” she said. “It is not a state matter, but I don’t like it. The Greens are close to me on the environment, terrorism, on the war. The Labor party is sitting on the fence, perpetuating the problem with the Liberal Party.

“Even on the war, tying Australia to the US and the ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] raids, Labor seems to be involved in the same hysteria that Howard is tapping into. They are using Muslims as scapegoats. They are giving all the racists power, legitimising them. It is scaring me. Howard is scooping up all the old fears, tapping into that uncertainty.

“In a sense, you start to wonder why you took your life and peace for granted, especially in Australia. Now everyone needs a scapegoat—things are uglier now. If anything, it is like a bad plot, like a bad movie. You can see that the path we’re taking is doomed. My daughter is part-Indonesian, part-Greek, one-third Australian. Her school is full of refugees, kids from so many backgrounds.”

Oakleigh is an older working class suburb in Melbourne’s south east, where Labor’s vote remained little changed at 55 percent, while the Green vote almost trebled to 10.2 percent, largely at the expense of the Liberals, whose vote fell by more than 12 percent to 31 percent.

Thuong, a young engineer, voted for the Greens. Racism, war and the environment were his main concerns. “I have lost interest in the main parties. The Greens came out opposing both Labor and Liberal.

“The government’s immigration policy basically raises more racism and racial hatred in Australia. I don’t like the way they handle it. The Labor Party should have raised concern about it. The government brings out racism at the time of the election and uses it as an issue to get votes.”

Lilis and her friend Juliana, both Indonesian-born students, voted Labor. Lilis, a final year arts/commerce student, said: “Actually, I don’t know why I voted Labor. I think Labor put on more teachers and spent more on public transport and a new ambulance system.”

Yvonne, a computer programmer, voted for the Greens. Previously she voted Labor, but “the Labor policies on boat people and war are not my views. In the past, Labor was more for the poor, more left wing. The Liberals were for business. These days that line is gone.

“In World War II, Australian soldiers got sent off to Europe by the people in charge. I don’t understand why anyone would go to Iraq. It’s all about oil. Bush wasn’t even voted in by the majority. My stepsons are aged 14 and 16. I’m not going to tell them to fight for an oil millionaire.”



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