

Australia: New South Wales election campaign reveals alienation from major parties

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The New South Wales state election being held tomorrow has been overshadowed by war in Iraq and a deep sense of alienation on the part of ordinary working people from the major political parties. In the eyes of millions the election campaign has been a virtual non-event, with near total unanimity between the incumbent Labor government led by Bob Carr and the opposition Liberal Party.

In New South Wales and Sydney in particular, the chasm between wealth and poverty is extreme. Decaying public hospitals, schools and rail infrastructure and the fomenting of social division are the legacy of eight years of Labor rule. Yet the deeply-felt hostility to social inequality and war have found no expression in an election campaign which has been thoroughly stage-managed and devoid of a voice for the concerns of ordinary people.

It is this political vacuum and absence of an organised political opposition that has seen Carr, with the assistance of the media, don the unlikely posture of statesman, with suggestions that he make the switch to federal politics. Often described as more right wing than state Liberal party leader John Brogden, Carr has functioned as a virtual adjunct to the federal Liberal government by joining the Bush administration's war on democratic rights under cover of the "war against terror".

Carr has the backing of big business and the media. Rupert Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* praised his seven straight balanced budgets and law and order policy. "*The Sunday Telegraph* believes a vote for Mr Carr's ALP [Australian Labor Party] ... is in the best interests of us all."

The war on Iraq is increasing the anxiety felt by both major parties that popular opposition to the imperialist slaughter will have a devastating impact on the NSW election result. They fear that protest votes going to minor parties or independents could create a shock election result. NSW has experienced the largest antiwar demonstrations in Australia, not only in Sydney but throughout country and regional centres.

Perhaps Carr's greatest threat comes from the Greens. Criticising Australia's participation in the war from the standpoint of defending "Australia's national interest"—i.e., the economic and political interests of the ruling elite—the Greens are making a direct appeal to the widespread antiwar sentiment. "An illegal military attack, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, is an unacceptable response to dictatorship. Two wrongs do not make a right," they have declared. The Democrats also are campaigning on an antiwar position.

The Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* published an editorial last week headed "A War Vote? Just say no." It complained: "The Greens want the NSW election reduced to a referendum on a war in Iraq." The editorial went on to say the Greens were "unqualified" for "sound government" and warned that: "Voters should stick to the state menu and leave anti-war sentiment to another electoral contest."

Four years ago, following the last NSW election, the *World Socialist*

Web Site reported: "In the March 27 [1999] election, nearly 25 percent of the vote went to other parties or independents, indicating rising discontent with the official political framework after two decades of declining living standards. In the ballot for the Legislative Council, the state's upper house, support for independents and others rose even further, to 35.3 percent, compared to just 37.3 percent for Labor and 27.4 percent for the Coalition."

The ruling elite fears that the two party system, which has served them well for more than a century, could break down, resulting in a hung parliament or the balance of power held by one or more independents or smaller parties, creating an unstable and unworkable government. This is why, in the aftermath of the 1999 election, the Carr Labor government, with the support of the Liberal/National opposition, passed measures to limit the right of the minor parties to run in elections.

Carr's new election legislation constitutes a fundamental attack on democratic rights. It blocks organisations without access to large funds and staffs from registering political parties and contesting elections. Parties who wish to stand candidates in the state elections must now pay \$2,000 and submit signed membership forms from 750 people in the state, 12 months beforehand. Instead of the present three-year registration period, they will have to qualify annually, updating their membership lists each year.

Moreover, the registration applications—complete with the names, addresses and political declarations of every one of the 750 members—will be open to public, as well as official, inspection. This will leave members of socialist and other opposition parties open to victimisation and harassment. Predictably, the number of parties standing in this election is less than a quarter of the number in 1999: just 19 compared to 80 four years ago.

The NSW Electoral Commission has also dredged up the 1912 Election Act. Its anti-democratic provisions stipulate that no one will be allowed to advocate a political perspective on election day except the major political parties and the few other groups able to overcome the new registration gauntlet.

Lobby groups such as the Wilderness Society, the Total Environment Centre and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW have been informed by the NSW Electoral Commission that they risk arrest and six months imprisonment if they hand out how-to-vote cards on election day. How-to-vote cards are traditionally distributed at polling stations by political parties and lobby groups.

While minor parties and independents have been effectively squeezed out, donations, particularly from the construction industry, clubs and hotels, have flowed into Labor's coffers. The money has financed a presidential-style campaign featuring Carr and his wife, Helena, in a blitz of television advertising reported to have cost \$12 million. This equals the

amount spent by the federal Liberal Party in its ultimately successful re-election in November 2001.

While Carr is confident of his support from business and the media there is deep-going apprehension among Labor bureaucrats about the extent of popular resentment. Carr has refused to debate Liberal leader, John Brogden, fearing a public forum could focus attention on his government's anti-working class record.

Both major parties have conducted an auction to outbid each other on law and order, which has been the central focus of Labor's platform over the past four years. Police numbers, for example, have increased from 13,368 in March 1999 to the current 14,500. In addition, the Carr government has spearheaded the racist vilification of immigrant communities, whipping up fears of "ethnic gang" violence and introducing legislation targeting the rights of young people. However, the electorate is becoming increasingly aware that "tough on crime" campaigns are a diversion from social problems. [See article below *Australia: State election descends into law-and-order bidding war.*]

Along with youth and minorities, the Carr government is enhancing its ability to attack political dissent. ABC News Online reported yesterday that the NSW police have set up a 24-hour operations centre to monitor anti-war demonstrations. According to the ABC, the acting NSW police commissioner, Andrew Scipione, refused to say how many police will operate the centre, what the cost may be and where it will be located, other than somewhere in the Sydney central business district. The ABC noted, however, that the centre "will focus on public places where there are large gatherings of people".

Antiwar protestors have expressed entirely legitimate concerns that popular opposition to the US led war against Iraq will be treated in the same way as a terrorist threat.

A review of the eight-year record of the Carr Labor government reveals a policy of increasingly sharp inroads into every aspect of government expenditure in New South Wales, resulting in the acute deterioration of government services.

Public Health System

Carr's major promise in the 1995 election was to halve hospital waiting lists, which are now higher than in 1995. The Labor government is not even attempting to make an appeal to the electorate on the basis that they will improve social conditions if re-elected.

The number of patients who are still waiting for surgery after 12 months has increased from 2,265 in December 1995 to 3,723 in September 2002. In December 1995, 6,800 people were waiting for elective medical treatment. The figure has now risen to 10,431.

The percentage of patients who had not been admitted to a ward bed by the eight-hour guideline increased from 15 percent in 1996/1997 to 27 percent in 2001/2002.

The number of hours hospitals have blocked access to ambulances because there are no beds available has increased dramatically, from 2,277 in 1994/1995 to 10,566 in 2001/2002. As a consequence, people die in ambulances, because they are not taken to the closest hospital.

Public Education

The proportion of the state budget which is being spent on education has dropped from 25.7 percent in 1997/1998 to 22 percent in 2001/2002. A NSW Teachers Federation survey found that many public schools across the state had kindergarten class sizes that were almost impossible to teach. Ryde had a maximum class size of 30 pupils, while Queanbeyan, Penrith, Campbelltown, Maitland and Clarence/Coffs Harbour all had 28 or 29 pupils.

The recent Vincent report found that money was being diverted to private schools, while public schooling was being eroded, leading to those in the public sector being denied a decent education. The NSW government now hands over \$40 million every year to private schools.

Gambling

NSW contains 10 percent of the world's poker machines and has the largest per capita percentage of such machines in the world. The Carr government regularly approves the installation of more machines in clubs and licensed premises, predominately in working class suburbs. The resulting gambling addiction among the poor and disadvantaged is creating a mounting social crisis, with huge personal debts, broken families, increased crime to support gambling habits and a myriad other problems. Carr routinely blames the victims caught up in the trap of chronic gambling, while his government rakes in 12 percent of its total revenue from the proceeds.

Public housing

It is now not unusual for people living in poverty to wait over five years for public housing. There are nearly 100,000 families on the NSW waiting list and another 12 households are added to this list every day. Despite this chronic shortage, the state housing department built only 1,285 new homes.

Much of the current public housing is old and run down, and there is a \$750 million maintenance backlog, which will take at least 20 years to overcome. NSW has some 25,500 homeless people.

Public Transport System

Two fatal rail accidents have occurred since the last state election, killing 14 commuters as a direct result of cuts to maintenance crews and funding to the state rail system. In the past 15 years, 30,000 of the 45,000 rail jobs have been destroyed. In 1996 the Labor Government dismantled the State Rail Authority into three commercial entities, which then further reduced manning levels and maintenance services. NSW has the highest level of rail fatalities of any state in Australia.

Electricity Supply

The deregulation of electricity services since 1999 has transformed public services into semi-government/private companies. This has resulted in a 30 percent rise in electricity disconnections to households unable to meet their bills. Carr pushed for the total privatisation of the state's electricity system in 1997, but was forced to retreat due to the opposition of electricity workers and consumers.

Workers Compensation

Changes to Workers Compensation legislation has meant drastic reductions to the entitlements of injured workers to claim damages, increasing the threshold of impairment and leaving many injured workers unable to make a claim at all.

None of the immense social problems facing the working class—economic insecurity, falling living standards and the run-down of public services—has been addressed in the current election campaign.

Under conditions of war, increasing global instability around the world and deepening social inequality, masses of people will begin to seek out a genuine alternative to the official parliamentary parties.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the socialist reorganisation of society on the basis of three fundamental principles: the international unity of the working class, the basic requirement that everyone has the resources needed for a productive, secure and enjoyable life and the struggle to develop a politically-conscious mass movement, independent of the existing Labor and union leaderships, that will lay the foundations for a genuinely democratic workers' government.



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