

Australian elections: the media rewrites history

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The reelection of the conservative Liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard—which, along with those of Bush and Blair, launched the war on Iraq—has become the subject of a campaign of deception by the media. The consistent theme of both international and Australian commentary is the false and cynical claim that the result proves that voters were indifferent to the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq.

The Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, Rupert Murdoch's daily tabloid, editorialised yesterday: "If the pre-election opinion polls in Australia were anything to go by, Mr Howard was going to be punished by the electorate for his support of Mr Bush in Iraq. But when it actually came to voting, Australians preferred Mr Howard's sober and conservative policies..."

A similar assessment has dominated television and radio current affairs. Political analyst Hugh Mackay told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) "7:30 Report" last night: "Things like house prices, things like the national obsession with home renovations and backyards, people would prefer to watch home renovation programs than current affairs programs on television. When they're in that kind of mood, they're not in the mood to throw out the government that has made them feel, in their mind, so comfortable."

Echoing the local coverage, the British *Independent* commented: "...blinker economic self-interest will trump the public's anger over the squalid fashion in which we were taken into war." The *New York Times* reported: "Aware of the strong opposition to the war, Mr. Howard has handled it with political deftness."

Some commentators have gone even further, asserting that Howard's reelection is actually evidence that the Australian populace backs the occupation of Iraq. Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of Murdoch's *Australian*, wrote yesterday: "Americans tend to see an idealised version of Australia—as a new world nation proverbially brave,

sporting, tolerant and successful, something like California without the crime. That such a nation endorses the Iraq venture is a powerful statement to the US and to the world."

Faced with this outpouring, it is necessary to review the real state of affairs in the lead-up to, and during, the Australian elections.

Far from revealing the complacency of the population, the election campaign was a travesty of democracy. Under conditions where millions of people had demonstrated their opposition to the war, and were seeking a political alternative to the free market agendas of the two major parties, Liberal and Labor, the political establishment and the mass media closed ranks to protect the Howard government.

As many as one million Australians—some five percent of the population—took part in the global antiwar protests on February 16 and 17, 2003. Close to half a million marched in Sydney alone. Moreover, every opinion poll since then has demonstrated that the Australian population overwhelmingly opposes the war on Iraq and the participation of Australian troops in the occupation.

This mass antiwar sentiment was disenfranchised during the elections. Flowing from its essential agreement with the Liberals' foreign policy and its support for the US-Australia military alliance, the Labor opposition refused to make the war an issue. Labor leader Mark Latham's election eve address made no mention of the war, prompting journalist Matt Price of the *Australian* to comment: "We can assume this spectacular omission from yesterday and the wider campaign is no mistake... the conflict that consumes the world—and had Australia agonising and arguing through most of 2002 and 2003—is apparently a dead issue..."

The Greens, which had won support throughout 2003 by claiming to be the main antiwar party, also refused to make the illegality of the war the primary issue. As much

as Labor, the Greens endorse an ongoing United Nations-backed occupation of Iraq. Its leader Bob Brown campaigned for the election of Latham's Labor as a "lesser evil" to Howard on environmental issues. As a result the Greens failed to live up to their own expectations, increasing their national vote by just 2.2 percent.

In the only electorate where the Greens actually focused on the war—the seat of Bennelong where former intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie stood against Howard—they achieved one of their highest votes, as well as a significant three percent swing against the Liberals. Such a swing on a national level would have resulted in the defeat of the government.

Throughout the six-week campaign—one of the longest in living memory—the establishment media worked to suppress any discussion on the war. From the corporate-controlled press through to the supposedly independent state-run ABC, they were all conscious that any party or candidates prepared to articulate popular antiwar sentiment would represent a direct challenge to Labor, and therefore to the two-party system itself.

At no time were Howard, or any of his ministers, questioned over the daily slaughter of Iraqis by the US military, or the lack of legitimacy of the US-installed Iraqi interim government. No section of the media subjected Howard to any serious scrutiny over his continuing assertion that the invasion of Iraq was justified. This was despite the publication of a further mass of evidence that the weapons of mass destruction claims were completely false. Nor did anyone ask Howard about the speculation that the UN might formally request a large Australian troop deployment to Iraq to assist the occupation during the elections planned for January 2005.

Above all, the media censored any voice articulating opposition to the Iraq war and the concerns of millions of people with deepening social inequality.

While Socialist Equality Party national secretary and Senate candidate Nick Beams was interviewed for an hour by Hong Kong radio, no section of the Australian media even reported the SEP campaign or its demands for the immediate withdrawal of all Australian, US and foreign troops from Iraq, along with the prosecution of the Howard government for war crimes. The considerable media coverage granted to the celebrity Labor candidate and former Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett consciously excluded the SEP's public exposure of Garrett's support for the occupation of Iraq.

The conspiracy of silence by the media provoked

condemnation from Brian Deegan, whose son was killed in the 2002 Bali bombing, and who stood against Foreign Affairs minister Alexander Downer in his safe Liberal seat of Mayo to oppose the Iraq invasion. Noting that he had been interviewed a number of times by the European press, Deegan accused the Australian media of allowing Howard to get through the election without having to answer for the war: "The media seem to have allowed him [Howard] to do that and allowed him simply to concentrate on the minutiae of several domestic policies, whilst we have still at large this very big issue of foreign policy that is haunting us and will haunt us in our future."

The Australian working class did not go to the ballot box on Saturday in a state of indifference to the world situation. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of ordinary people felt a profound sense of alienation from the entire electoral process. The mass opposition to militarism and social inequality had no outlet through the Labor Party or the Greens, leaving many people, who confront economic insecurity, are highly indebted, and face the prospect of losing their jobs in any economic downturn, susceptible to Howard's scare campaign that interest rates would increase if his government were defeated.

The role played by the establishment media in assisting the return of the Howard government highlights the crucial importance of the SEP's election campaign which was aimed, above all, at expanding the audience of the *World Socialist Web Site* and building a new, socialist and internationalist party of the working class.



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