

Campaign material suppressed in Australian election

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21 October 2004

The corporate media have responded to the reelection of Australian Prime Minister John Howard's conservative Liberal-National coalition by claiming that the vote signified mass support for the Iraq war and confidence in the Howard government's "economic" record.

Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper editorialised that the "nation" had endorsed involvement in the "Iraq venture". Other commentators claimed that the Howard government had been returned because it had brought "prosperity" to Australia and made voters feel "comfortable". "Never have suburban Australians been even remotely as wealthy as now," one journalist opined.

These assessments turn reality on its head. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has revealed, the election was characterised by widespread voter disaffection and the suppression of discussion on the central issues. Howard's coalition, supported by the opposition Labor Party, avoided any debate on the Iraq war or Australia's rising levels of poverty and social inequality. With media support, these critical questions were screened out of the election campaign.

At the same time, the government orchestrated an unprecedented campaign to directly censor any dissenting voices. Two incidents highlight the extent to which basic democratic rights were undermined.

Chris Morgan from Melbourne was so alarmed by the Australian involvement in the bloody US-led occupation of Iraq that he decided in September to produce a pamphlet for distribution during the election campaign.

Entitled "Who Really Pays the Cost of War?" the one-page pamphlet, which described the invasion of Iraq as "illegal" and "unprovoked", featured a picture of Ali Abbas, a 12-year-old Iraqi boy who had his arms blown

off by US-led bombing raids.

The pamphlet explained that Abbas' mother, father and younger brother had been killed in the attack, and that the boy had suffered burns to 60 percent of his body. This carnage, it said, was simply regarded as "collateral damage" by the invading military forces.

Alongside the image was a picture of Howard standing with four blank cutouts of his own family. The accompanying text said: "John Howard—Prime Minister. His family is his most precious thing. He doesn't gamble with them. Why was Ali's family any less precious?" The pamphlet concluded with an appeal for voters to place the Liberals last in the election.

Morgan, who does not belong to any political party, produced 85,000 copies of the statement at his own expense and planned to send them to voters in nine seats narrowly held by the Liberal Party. Australia Post, the state-owned national postal service, however, intervened. In a direct breach of Morgan's democratic rights, it refused to distribute the pamphlet, declaring that the graphic photo of Abbas was "offensive" and therefore could not be sent by mail.

Challenged over this attack on free speech, an Australia Post spokeswoman, Libby Collett, declared that the distribution ban was "not political". The letter containing the leaflet, she said, would not be addressed to any particular individual and therefore the photo of Abbas might "distress" those receiving it. No explanation was given about the fact that Abbas' photo, as well as television news footage of the boy, had already been widely published and broadcast.

This wasn't the only act of censorship, within days of the Australia Post announcement a group of church welfare organisations was forced to stop distributing a "Vote 1 No More Poverty" leaflet in Dobell, a marginal electorate in the state of New South Wales. Liberal

Party officials threatened action against the charities, claiming that the anti-poverty leaflet breached Australian electoral laws.

The leaflets did not advocate a vote for any particular party but were designed to provoke discussion on the escalating level of poverty and the refusal of any of the major parties to address it. They pointed out that Australia had the 4th highest rate of poverty in the industrialised world and declared: “There are 3.6 million Australians living on a household income of under \$400 a week and over 800,000 children living in households where no one has ever worked ... We are witness to a clear failure to provide fair and adequate levels of full-time employment, education, health, and affordable housing for low-income families.”

The leaflet urged voters to contact candidates or sitting members and ask them what they thought about poverty in Australia and what they planned to do about it if elected.

Liberal Party officials immediately moved to stop its distribution. NSW Liberal Party director Scott Morrison wrote to the charities, demanding that they “immediately cease circulating the offending material” or face legal action under the Electoral Act. Despite the fact that the leaflet prominently displayed the charities’ names, he claimed it violated electoral laws because it had no name and contact address for the individual authorising the material and was therefore illegal.

St Vincent de Paul’s media spokesman Terry McCarthy told the WSWS this week that his organisation was surprised by the legal threats but admitted that it was “typical” of the response by most politicians to the anti-poverty campaign.

“This applied to both the Liberal and Labor parties, which displayed no concern over the serious levels of poverty in this country. They were out there shamelessly buying votes in the marginal electorates with no care for the millions of poverty-stricken people in serious need,” he said. “The major parties are not interested because it doesn’t win elections. Instead, with the backing of the media, they think they can get votes by demeaning and demonising the poor.”

Eventually, after agreeing to withdraw the leaflets, the charities circulated an amended version with the required authorisation and contact address. Significantly, the Labor Party remained silent on this, and the attack on Chris Morgan’s democratic rights,

underscoring, yet again, its fundamental agreement with the political line of the Howard government on every major question.



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