

Political lessons of the US and Australian elections

Nick Beams

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The following speech was delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a public meeting in Sydney on December 7.

In considering the outcome of the Australian federal election and the US presidential poll, notwithstanding the significant differences between the two political systems, one is struck by a number of common features. In both countries, the election outcome was greeted with the question: how could it happen?

For millions of people, the result was truly shocking. Bush and Howard had launched an illegal war based on a series of lies and falsifications and yet they were returned to office. Not only were they returned, but they achieved an increased majority. The shock was not just that they were back in power. It reflected even deeper concerns that the political process had proved incapable of making a necessary correction. It was, in some ways, a repeat, at a higher level, of the experience of February 2003 when millions demonstrated around the world against the Iraq war—the largest demonstrations in history—only to find that their protests made no impact on their governments and the war went ahead as planned.

Prior to the election an air of illegitimacy hung over both the Howard and Bush governments. In the US the election of 2000 was viewed by many as something of a fluke, an aberration, which the electoral process would correct. Bush did not win the popular vote in 2000 and, if the votes had been counted correctly in Florida, would not have won the Electoral College vote. He was not elected, but selected by the Supreme Court, which usurped the democratic rights of the people.

Though not as strong, there were similar sentiments regarding the 2001 re-election of the Howard government. Prior to the election, Howard was in trouble and trailing badly at the polls. But in August, the Tampa and its rescued boatload of refugees entered Australian waters, and, with the aid of lies about children being thrown overboard, Howard whipped up a vicious anti-asylum seeker campaign. Bolstered by the events of September 11, he was able to win office just two months later by fomenting fears over “border protection.” At the 2004 election, many thought that the injustices of 2001 would be corrected. But instead Howard increased his vote.

How are these results to be explained? Right-wing media commentators in Australia had a ready answer: opposition to Howard over the Iraq war was confined to the “cultural elites”—the doctors’ wives in leafy suburbs—while “ordinary Australians” found Howard’s conservatism attractive and were fearful about the economic consequences of a change of government. The view from the other side was not essentially different, except that instead of praising the voters, it denounced them. According to Alan Ramsey in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the outcome was the result of the “comfortable idiocy of the manipulated minority.”

Reactions from the US “left” on the re-election of Bush were similar. Three days after the election, a columnist for the liberal-left magazine the *Nation*, Katha Pollitt, in an article entitled “Mourn”, refused to hear any

“carping criticisms” of John Kerry, insisting he was “a pretty good candidate.” The people were to blame. This time, she insisted, “the voters chose what they actually want: nationalism, pre-emptive war, order not justice, ‘safety through torture’, a backlash against women and gays, a gulf between haves and have-nots, government largesse for their churches and a my-way-or-the-highway President.”

In the immediate aftermath of the US election, opinion polls showed that so-called “values” played a significant role in determining voters’ intentions. Attention has turned to the role of religious fundamentalism in explaining the victory of Bush and the general electoral dominance of the Republican Party over the past quarter of a century and more.

In his recent book *What’s the Matter with America?* (first edition published as *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*), Thomas Frank examines a present-day political conundrum: the undoubted fact that some of the poorest and most oppressed sections of American society have consistently and increasingly delivered their votes to the Republican Party. Surveying his home state of Kansas, Frank describes how the anger, frustration and alienation produced by the economic devastation arising from free market programs have been channelled into hostility toward “liberal elites”. Areas of the lowest per capita income and lowest median housing values consistently report the strongest support for the most conservative politicians. The geography of social class has been turned upside down.

“Let us ... ponder this all-American dysfunction,” he writes. “A state is spectacularly ill-served by the Reagan-Bush stampede of deregulation, privatisation, and laissez-faire. It sees its countryside depopulated, its towns disintegrate, its cities stagnate—and its wealthy enclaves sparkle, behind their remote-controlled security gates. The state erupts in revolt ... But what do its rebels demand? More of the very measures that have brought ruination on them and their neighbours in the first place. This is not just the mystery of Kansas; this is the mystery of America, the historical shift that has made it all possible” [*What’s the Matter With America?* p. 76].

The rise of religious fundamentalism and the ability of the Republicans to mobilise their base on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and gun control certainly played an important part in the Republicans’ success. But this is not an explanation for their victory. In considering this phenomenon, the immediate question arises: what are its socio-economic roots? Why has the growth of economic insecurity, inequality and social tensions taken the form of a growth of religious sentiments and a cultural backlash against what are seen as “liberal” values. Why could not the Democrats counter the appeal made by the Republicans? What is the source of the hallucinatory power of religion and why could it not be countered? In other words, to simply ascribe the victory of the Republicans to religious sentiment, and the party’s ability to mobilise it, is not an explanation of the Bush election victory, but merely another description of it.

In the Australian elections, events took a different form, but similar

questions arise. There was an increased vote for the Liberals in outer suburban areas with a high percentage of households paying mortgages. The greater the percentage of mortgagees, the larger the swing to the Liberals. The Liberals based their election tactics on a scare campaign: a vote for Labor would mean increased interest rates. While hailing the Liberals' record in bringing economic prosperity, Howard's campaign exploited the economic insecurity that dominates the lives of millions of people.

The source of the fears can be seen in the debt figures. Housing debt increased by 15.4 percent per year in the five years to 2002 and by more than 20 percent in 2003. In 1993, household debt was 56 percent of total income. By 2003 it had doubled to more than 125 percent. Interest rates have fallen significantly since the levels of 17 percent and more in the late 1980s. But because of the housing price bubble, homebuyers are more deeply in debt than ever before, and extremely susceptible to even a small rise in interest rates.

The precarious position of many working class families in the outer suburbs certainly points to the material conditions underlying the Liberals' scare campaign. But it does not explain why this fear and uncertainty translated into a vote for the Howard government. It could have resulted instead in a massive vote against the government, whose policies were seen to have created conditions where working people could be bankrupted almost overnight.

In other words, in considering the US and Australian election results, we have to examine both the policies of the Democrats and Labor Party during the election campaign and the longer-term historical processes that have shaped the political consciousness and understanding of broad masses of the population.

In the US campaign, the Democrats advanced no policies to address, let alone start to resolve, the problems confronting the American people. The Republicans attacked Kerry as a flip-flop candidate, which had a certain resonance because of the essential contradiction of the Democratic Party. It is a bourgeois party, committed to the defence of the interests of corporate America above all else, while attempting to make an appeal to the interests of ordinary working people. Thus, Kerry made criticisms of the Iraq war, but insisted that he would not change his vote giving Bush war powers, even in light of the fact that the case for war was completely bogus. He was in favour of the "war on terror" and committed to making funds available to pay for it, but social programs had to be financed on a pay-as-you-go basis.

The Republicans' election strategy consisted of mobilising their base—that is, bringing out large sections of the population who would respond to the appeal to "values." But how did such a base come into existence? Here it is necessary to examine the experiences of the last decades of the twentieth century.

The most significant feature of this period has been the complete collapse of what was once the labour movement. This has meant that millions of workers have no organisation through which to confront their social and political problems and defend their interests as a class. The social tensions generated by the increasing difficulty of their lives find no progressive outlet, leaving them susceptible to the evangelicals and the diatribes of the right-wing radio and television pundits.

In his report on the US elections, WWSW editorial board chairman David North summed up the situation as follows:

"Without jobs, cut off from the deep-rooted social relations that sustained class consciousness over generations of struggle, alienated from a union that had deserted them, the militant workers of yesterday became susceptible to well-practiced pitchmen of the Evangelical Industry, always on the look-out for new customers. For the children of such workers, who have grown up entirely outside the milieu of an organised labour movement and with little or no awareness of the traditions of class struggle, the obstacles to the development of class consciousness are

considerable. From what source will they acquire the information and insights that facilitate the development of a critical attitude toward contemporary society, let alone a sense that a better and more humane society—in *this world and in their lifetime*—is possible? Certainly not from the existing political parties or from the cesspool of the mass media."

In Australia, Howard's victory saw the ALP vote fall to an historic low of below 38 percent. This result was not a one-off aberration, but the continuation of a trend that has developed over the past 15 years. It is now more than 20 years since the Hawke government came to power with the defeat of the Liberals under Fraser. This electoral victory was the outcome of a political movement of the working class in response to the deepest recession since the 1930s. In many ways, once the election was called in early 1983, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Labor was returned with a primary vote of almost one in two. Now the vote for Labor is little more than one in three and has remained at that level since the elections of 1993.

The reason for this historic decline, which first became evident in the late 1980s, is clear: the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, in collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, led an unending assault on the conditions and social position of the working class as they sought to create the conditions for the free market through the ending of regulation and a massive redistribution of wealth from labour to capital. No effort was spared: the union bureaucracy collaborated with the courts and the police to smash up the Builders Labourers Federation; union delegates in the metal unions who dared to oppose the new order were driven out; the electricity workers in Queensland were left isolated; and the pilots' strike was defeated with the use of the military. If large sections of the working class are drawn in by Howard's campaigns, it is hardly surprising given that the Labor Party and the trade union movement have ceased to exist as a force that in any way advances an alternative, socially-progressive perspective. The old program of social reformism has completely collapsed.

In the US and Australia, the Democrats and the Labor Party are drawing similar conclusions from their defeat. The Democrats have decided that culture and character, rather than policies and program, must be brought to the centre. No examination is to be made of why irrational religious prejudices have come to the play such a dominant role in American political life.

The theme of Labor's election post-mortems is that the party must abandon any ambivalence over free-market reform and embrace the policies initiated under the Hawke and Keating governments. Already this policy is being put into practice, with the Labor Party dropping all opposition to the legislative program of the Howard government.

In a speech on November 19, Labor leader Mark Latham called for a new basis to the "economic purpose and legitimacy of the Labor movement." There had to be a turn to what he called the "new middle class" with its army of "contractors, consultants, franchisees and entrepreneurs." "People have broken free from large, hierarchical organisations and become agents of their own economic future."

In fact, the opposite is the case: never have the lives of working people the world over been more completely dominated by vast economic forces—in the form of banks, transnational corporations and financial institutions—over which they have no control. The new "entrepreneurs" who have, according to Latham, broken free from the capital labour relation, are the result of the cost-cutting processes emanating from major corporations. Of course, the composition of the working class has changed, as it has throughout the history of capitalism. What is significant about Latham's perspective is its complete abandonment of any conception that the task is to reshape society. If the Democrats in the US are finding God, the Laborites in Australia are finding Margaret Thatcher and her philosophy that there is no such thing as society, only the individual.

In both elections, the SEP in the US and Australia conducted its intervention in opposition to the radical left parties and protest groups, all of which came together under the banner of the “lesser evil”. That is, whatever the faults of Kerry and the Democrats or Latham and the Labor Party, in the final analysis they represented a “lesser evil” compared to the return of Bush or Howard.

We explained that the greatest danger was not the return of Bush or Howard, but the failure of the working class to develop its own independent perspective and program. Our opponents, of course, claimed that they too were in favour of developing a socialist movement of the working class, but insisted that this was not the immediate task.

Take the position of Mr Tariq Ali, for example, who declared that the defeat of Bush by Kerry was a priority for everyone opposed to the war in Iraq. How that was the case, given that Kerry supported the war and called for the stepping-up of US troop deployment, Mr Ali did not explain. His justification was with the time-worn worship of the given facts that characterises all forms of opportunism.

Responding to his critics, he wrote: “To people who say, ‘Are you advocating a vote for Kerry, you sellout,’ my response is, are you seriously advocating that Bush should stay in power? Because that’s the alternative. There’s no third party. There’s no Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party winning a million votes and being locked up for ten years as a result. He’s not around.”

But Mr Ali and others of his ilk do not ask: why is there no socialist movement? One of the reasons is the continued subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, encouraged by political figures such as Tariq Ali and his predecessors. The argument has always been: yes, we are in favour of the development of a socialist movement; of course we recognise that the Democratic Party is a bourgeois party; but right now the situation demands that the working class mobilise behind it in order to defeat the Republicans; only after that we can consider the longer-term objective.

In this election, however, the opportunist chickens have, so to speak, come home to roost. The chief reason that significant sections of the working class were vulnerable to the right-wing nostrums of the Republicans and the appeals to “values” was the political confusion generated by decades of subordination to the Democratic Party. In order words, the fight for the development of socialist consciousness in the working class, the political re-arming of the working class, the struggle to end its subordination to the bourgeois parties—deemed to be impractical in face of the immediate tasks at hand—has turned out to be the most decisive and immediate question of all.

Let me turn to another radical left luminary, Mr Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers Party. Pointing to the fact that some of the poorest and most oppressed sections of the population voted for the Republicans, he insisted that the answer was “class politics that seeks to focus the rage of working people on the real source of their suffering—the tiny, ultra-rich business class that dominates American society and buys both Republicans and Democrats to do their will. This means building on the brave effort by Ralph Nader and his small band of supporters to develop a genuine alternative to both the main parties” [*Socialist Worker*, November 11, 2004].

The aim of Nader and his movement, as well as the Greens, to whom he is sometimes allied, is not to build a party that represents and fights for the independent interests of working people. Rather it is to push the Democratic Party to the left. Nader does not represent an alternative to the Democratic Party, but is part of the political mechanisms aimed at keeping the working class trapped within it.

Here in Australia, the *Socialist Worker*, a mouthpiece of the protest movements, described the election as a “wake-up call to the left”. Despite the building of movements that challenged Howard over refugees and the Iraq war, it explained, this was not enough to “tip the balance against

Howard.” “The reason is that the activist networks building opposition to war and racism do not have deep enough roots in the wider population, particularly the organised labour movement.”

But the central political problem is that an organised labour movement does not exist. There is a Labor Party and there are trade unions, but these organisations have nothing to do with advancing the social position and interests of the broad mass of working people. There is not a labour movement, but a bureaucratic shell. Like a cicada on a tree trunk, the outer casing remains and gives the appearance of what once existed, but the inner substance has gone. The task is not to integrate with a non-existent organised labour movement but to reconstruct one. That means examining the reasons for the decay and disintegration of the previous structures of the workers’ movement and drawing the necessary political conclusions.

The development of the workers’ movement has always been bound up with the struggle for a socialist program and perspective. Today the central task is the political re-education of the workers’ movement through the re-introduction of a socialist culture and outlook. What does this perspective embody?

First of all, it involves a recognition that the problems confronting the working class are global in their origin and scope, and that no solution to any of the problems confronting the world’s people is to be found on the basis of a national program. The first and most important step forward in the revival of the workers’ movement is an understanding that the very nation-state structures themselves lie at the heart of all the problems confronting humanity.

The global productive forces have expanded to such a degree that they cannot be utilised rationally in a world that is cut and divided into competing nation-states. Nor does the solution lie in the global dominance of one super-power over all others. A point has been reached in the historical development of human society where the rational and intelligent development of man’s productive forces must be undertaken on an international scale through the collaboration of the world’s producers in the interests of human need and not the profits of giant corporations and financial institutions.

Secondly, the re-education and re-arming of the workers’ movement requires going beyond a resigned acceptance of capitalism and the hope that things may get better in the future. What is needed is the development of a political struggle for the program of international socialism, and all that this entails.

Thirdly, it must be grounded on the understanding that there are no shortcuts. There is no clever tactical initiative that will lead to some other organisation transforming itself into the leadership of a socialist movement. The transformation of the ugly toad into a handsome prince is fairy story, not a political perspective. But there are people and organisations who peddle such tales.

The Socialist Alliance is one such group. One of its chief activities in the election was to promote illusions in the power of mass pressure and the capacity of the Greens to chart a new course for the working class.

In an editorial published on the eve of the election, the Socialist Alliance praised Green MPs for standing up against economic rationalism in defence of human decency and democratic freedoms, and extending their opposition to measures such as Howard’s Workplace Relations Act.

“But the Greens will face their own critical choices—if not immediately then inescapably. When the moment of decision comes will they follow their German counterparts in making a ‘red-green’ alliance to their right—with the ALP—or to their left?”

In fact, it is not a matter of the Australian Greens following their counterparts in Germany. In many ways, they charted the course for their counterparts internationally. In the late 1980s, as Bob Brown reminded his listeners at his National Press Club Address just after the election was called, the Greens in Tasmania formed an alliance with the Labor Party

while it administered some of the largest budget spending cuts in that state's history. Despite opposition, from within its own ranks and more broadly, the Greens, Brown proudly insisted, "held the line." His purpose in discussing this history was to make clear that the Greens were more than ready to do so again.

According to the Socialist Alliance, there is an "irreducible incompatibility" between the Greens' four principles of social justice, peace, democracy and environmental sustainability and "predatory capitalism."

"This contradiction gets resolved in one of two ways: sooner or later instinctive and diffuse anti-capitalism either succumbs to the imperatives of the profit system or it becomes conscious and purposeful anti-capitalism—socialism in deed, if not in word" [*Green Left Weekly*, October 6, 2004].

"Socialism in deed, if not in word." In these few words are summed up the position of all the opportunist tendencies, who believe that they can short cut and somehow cheat the historical process, and that it is possible for socialism to be achieved without being consciously fought for. There cannot be socialism in deed and not in word, inasmuch as socialism is the outcome of a political program which is continually discussed, argued for and worked over. Socialism will develop as the consciously articulated program of a mass movement of the international working class, or it will not develop at all. To be sure, there are, and will be increasingly in the future, outbursts of spontaneous anti-capitalist sentiments, but a sentiment, a protest, even if it assumes extremely militant forms, is not capable of overthrowing capitalism.

More than a century ago, Frederick Engels took up precisely this issue. Reviewing in 1893 the lessons to be drawn from the failure of the 1848 revolutions, he explained that the conceptions which had held sway at that time had proven to be completely inadequate.

"The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves have already grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for, body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that. But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long, persistent work is required, and it is just this work that we are now pursuing...."

But, the question arises, how realistic is this perspective? Does not the global dominance of the United States make the achievement of socialism impossible? Is that not the historical significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union?

Let us recall the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International at the time. We insisted that the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the end of socialism or the triumph of capitalism, but the breakdown of the post-war economic and political order and the eruption of the central contradiction of world capitalism: between the global development of the productive forces and the nation-state system.

The ever-increasing resort to militarism by the United States over the past decade and a half—the process did not begin with the George W. Bush administration—represents the desperate attempt by the dominant capitalist power to resolve this contradiction in its own interests, by establishing the US as the supreme nation-state over all others. Is such a perspective viable? Can the US establish some kind of Pax Americana—in which case we would have to conclude that any prospect of its overthrow was historically unviable—or is the attempt to do so going to produce such social and political upheavals as will bring into question the very continuation of the capitalist order itself? That is how matters stand.

Firstly, let us examine the military situation. An article in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine sums up the thinking in large sections of US ruling circles. The authors conclude that 18 months after the invasion of Iraq the US has a serious legitimacy problem. This is in

marked contrast to the situation which prevailed after World War II, when the US took on responsibility for maintaining the stability of the global political order. Now, they point out, the US has undergone a "startling loss of legitimacy."

"Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration revealed a deep suspicion of international law. Its undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, John Bolton, had noted in the late 1990s that 'it is a big mistake for us to grant any validity to international law even when it may seem in our short-term interest to do so—because, over the long term, the goal of those who think that international law really means anything are those who want to constrict the United States.' This augured a fundamentally contemptuous attitude toward the principles that had previously sustained US legitimacy. But what were straws in the wind before September 11 soon became a virtual tornado as the Bush response to the attacks became clear.

"It is evident that the United States has reached a kind of tipping point, where world public opinion defines Washington as much, if not more, by the ease with which it justifies illegal actions as by its commitment to legality. The United States has assumed many of the very features of the 'rogue nations' against which it has rhetorically—and sometimes literally—done battle over the years. The legitimacy of U.S. power has, at a minimum, been eroded significantly, and at certain moments—for instance, in the general revulsion to reports of widespread torture in Iraq—it seems to have vanished entirely."

According to the authors, the road back will not be easy. It involves a return to lawful conduct. But this simply raises the question: why was lawful conduct abandoned in the first place? Is this not an expression of the fact that the US cannot maintain its position within the old framework that it established at the end of World War II?

Concerns over the international position of the US are to be found in the Pentagon itself. A report on "strategic communications", prepared last September by the Defence Science Board, but only now made available, notes that, in the "war of ideas or the struggle for hearts and minds", American efforts "have not only failed, they may also have achieved the opposite of what they intended."

The US, it says, is engaged in a "global and generational struggle of ideas" which it is rapidly losing, and that "world wide anger and discontent are directed at America's tarnished credibility and the ways the US pursues its goals. There is a consensus that America's power to persuade is in a state of crisis." The concern of the report's authors arises from the fact that they at least understand, even if their political masters do not, that military power alone is not enough to exercise global dominance.

If US imperialism is beset by external conflicts and contradictions, the situation internally is no better. Politically, the population is deeply divided. The ruling regime sustains itself through a combination of fear, prejudice and religious obscurantism. At the same time among its opponents there is anger, disappointment, bitterness and confusion. The election result itself has brought home to growing numbers of people that they must undertake a serious examination of their own political conceptions and begin a search for political alternatives.

Last, but no means least, there is the economic situation. US imperialism seeks to resolve the contradictions of the world capitalist system by establishing itself as the global overlord. Yet it undertakes this task in conditions of profound economic weakness. The US financial system is dependent on the inflow of at least \$2.6 billion every working day. When the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the 1980s, the US was still a net creditor nation. Today it is the world's largest debtor. Up to three quarters of the world's balance of payments surpluses have to be recycled into the US to keep it afloat financially.

The post-war pre-eminence of the US was established on the basis of its financial system and superior production methods. Today, US finances are

dependent on the Asian central banks purchasing sufficient dollar assets to prevent a collapse of the US currency and spiraling interest rates.

For the past two hundred years historians have argued about whether the collapse of the Roman Empire was the result of external conflicts, mounting economic problems, or the development of social and class conflicts within Rome itself. In the case of the United States, all of these processes are well under way even before a global empire has been established.

Various radical tendencies have depicted the processes of globalisation as if they were the result of a design by the US to impose its rule over the rest of the world. In fact, these processes have actually undermined the power of the US internationally and brought about the growth of massive social inequality at home. In other words, the social and political conflicts that grip the world find their most acute expression inside the United States.

The undermining of the economic power of the US has tremendous historical significance, for, in the final analysis, it was this power which sustained the capitalist order throughout the twentieth century. No more. A new period of revolutionary struggles has opened up for which it is necessary to prepare. The elections in the US and Australia—and this is a reflection of an international process—have revealed that the political divisions are not between the major parties, but between the official political apparatus and the vast mass of the population. The political situation will provide no shortage of opportunities to advance the work of constructing the revolutionary socialist alternative in the coming period.



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