

Australia: Werriwa by-election result no great boost for Labor

The Editorial Board
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The by-election for the outer Sydney seat of Werriwa last Saturday resulted in a win for the Australian Labor Party (ALP), but the party can draw little joy from the outcome. Its candidate Chris Hayes, a former union official turned private industrial relations consultant, gained 55.53 percent of the primary vote—an increase of 2.89 percent over the ALP result in the federal election last October. The ALP victory is deceptive, however, disguising a profound alienation with Labor among broad layers of voters in a seat that the party has held for 71 years.

The by-election was necessitated by the resignation of Mark Latham, not only as Labor leader but from parliament, following the ALP's defeat in last October's federal election. Labor lost despite the widespread opposition to the Liberal-National Party coalition led by Prime Minister John Howard over the Iraq war, deteriorating living standards and attacks on democratic rights.

ALP figures claimed over the weekend that the Werriwa result marked a resurgence in support for the party. Latham's replacement as ALP leader, Kim Beazley, declared that the Werriwa result was "a sign that we have been doing our job, that we have stabilised, and that we are now holding the government accountable". In his victory speech, Hayes declared: "Labor is back in business".

This triumphalism, however, masked a distinct nervousness in the Labor leadership, born out by its own private polling, that the party could have lost the seat. There was also a collective sigh of relief in ruling circles expressed most clearly in an editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*. If Labor had lost, it began, the party "could have pulled up stumps and left the job of serious opposition to somebody else". It stated: "A strong political system needs a strong opposition... for this reason alone it is good to see Labor beginning to regroup".

In fact, the result was no ringing endorsement either of Labor or Beazley. In the first place, the Liberal Party did not stand a candidate. Having won the October election by burying the issue of the Iraq war, with Labor's complicity, and running a scare campaign on interest rates, Howard did not want a campaign that once again raised the issues. This was particularly the case as his government had just announced the dispatch of a further 450 Australian troops to Iraq and the Reserve Bank was about to hike up interest rates.

The media played its part by treating the by-election and its 16 candidates as a circus. In the final days, after completely ignoring the election for most of the campaign, the TV and press focussed attention on the more offbeat candidates.

On election night, Hayes put his win down to interest rate increases and the troop deployment. But in the course of the campaign, he remained virtually silent on these and on every other issue. The ALP promoted him as a family man and its only slogan was "local and proud of it". Insofar as the Labor Party had an electoral strategy, it was to coast to victory on the basis of disaffection with Howard. As in October, the Werriwa by-election demonstrated that there are no fundamental differences between the two major parties.

During the election, social tensions erupted in a series of street battles between police and working class youth in Macquarie Fields, part of the Werriwa electorate. The state Labor government had provocatively dispatched hundreds of riot police to the area after two young men died as a result of a high-speed police car chase in the area. After saying nothing on the issue for most of the campaign, Hayes finally lined up behind the right-wing law-and-order stance of state Labor Premier Bob Carr, telling the *Sun Herald* that the police operations had been "sane".

Even in crude electoral terms, Labor's win in Werriwa was no triumph. Traditionally, voters have used by-elections to express anti-government sentiment. The 2.9 percent swing to Labor in Werriwa, however, was markedly less than the 6.5 percent average swing against the government in by-elections since 1949. Werriwa, which covers large working class suburbs, both public housing estates and private developments, was once regarded as one of the safest ALP seats. As recently as 1994, Latham polled 61 percent of the vote when the ALP hierarchy first installed him in the seat.

Moreover, there was a marked differentiation within the electorate in last Saturday's poll. In more established working class suburbs like Casula, Macquarie Fields, Minto, Prestons and Greenway Park, there were swings against Labor. Alongside a general hostility to Labor, many voters were angry at the state Labor government which has presided over continuing deterioration in public health, education, roads, transport and other infrastructure.

Labor suffered its sharpest rebuff at the Eucalyptus Drive polling booth in Macquarie Fields—the scene of police confrontations just three weeks earlier. Labor's vote fell by almost 10 percent, reflecting anger over the police violence and Carr's statement that the problems in the Glenquarie public housing estate were the result of "hardened criminals", not social disadvantage.

Virtually all of Labor's increased vote was in the new, mortgage-belt suburbs such as Green Valley, Hinchinbrook, Hoxton Park and Cecil Hills, where Labor's vote rose by 4 to 9 percentage points. These areas had swung equally sharply to the Liberals last October, mainly in response to the Howard government's claim that interest rates would increase sharply under Labor. The swing back to the ALP points to underlying volatility among many younger voters who confront tremendous economic insecurity and have no attraction or loyalty to either major party.

The collapse of active support for Labor was also seen in the lack of local party members on polling booths—a further symptom of plummeting membership and a defunct branch structure. Among those seen handing out ALP how-to-vote cards were Senator Michael Forshaw, federal MP Roger Price and state housing minister Joe Tripodi. According to a newsletter circulated by former ALP parliamentarian Rodney Cavalier, the party's Werriwa federal electoral council has not met for three years.

These raw figures point to a deeper underlying alienation and disaffection among broad layers of working people not only to Labor but

the entire political establishment.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and our candidate Mike Head campaigned energetically throughout the electorate to raise the necessity for a socialist perspective to combat militarism and war, deepening social inequality and to defend democratic rights. On polling day, SEP members and supporters used the opportunity to discuss the party's policies with voters both entering and leaving the booths.

Far from any enthusiasm for Labor, what was revealed was deeply felt anger with both political parties over the Iraq war, the vilification of Macquarie Fields youth, and a broad range of social issues. [See: Australian by-election: a microcosm of political alienation and hostility] Insofar as people voted for Labor, it was to express their opposition to the Howard government or out of inertia. Despite their hostility to Liberal and Labor, many people nevertheless clung to the belief that there was no alternative to the two-party system. All one could do was apply pressure on one or other party to implement better policies.

The same sentiment was reflected negatively in the high informal vote of 10.78 percent—up from 8 percent last year and 5 percent in 1994. As voting is compulsory in Australia, many voters, seeing no other option, expressed their disgust by deliberately spoiling their ballots. From the reported vote figures, it is possible that another 10 percent of the 90,760 enrolled voters may not have voted at all, despite a possible \$100 penalty.

The remaining 45 percent of the formal vote was spread out over the large number of remaining candidates, including a significant number of extreme right-wing contenders seeking to capitalise on the hostility to Labor and Liberal.

While the Liberal Party stood no official candidate, two Liberal Party members stood as “independents”—James Young and Ned Mannoun—hoping no doubt to position themselves for the next federal election. Young specifically identified himself with the Howard government and defended its record. He gained 7.8 percent of the vote, while Mannoun secured just 1.8 percent—in total far less than Liberal vote of 35 percent in the 2004 election.

Two anti-immigrant parties—One Nation and Australians Against Further Immigration—secured 8.5 percent of the vote by focussing on the most socially-deprived areas of the electorate, including Macquarie Fields. Another 8.0 percent went to Christian fundamentalist parties—Family First and the Christian Democratic Party. Right-wing populists—including independent Joe Bryant and Deborah Locke from People Power—gained 2.7 percent and 2.1 percent respectively.

In all, some 21 percent of the vote went to parties or individuals standing for right-wing policies. While many of these votes will have been a form of protest against Labor and the Howard government, the outcome underscores the danger that discontent and political alienation can take a reactionary direction.

Another expression of disgust was the relatively high vote for independent Mal Lees, a radio announcer, who gained 2 percent on the basis of a prank campaign—the promise of free beer, “silly shirt” days and the declaration that he would repudiate all promises if elected.

The Greens, which had won the ALP “heartland” Wollongong-based seat of Cunningham in an October 2002 by-election, and which at times promotes itself as being to the “left” of Labor, won just 5.5 percent of the vote—up from 3.8 percent last year.

Unlike the Cunningham by-election, in which the Greens capitalised on mounting antiwar sentiment in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion, the party and its candidate had almost nothing to say about Howard's new troop deployment to Iraq, nor on Labor's tacit acceptance of the decision. Its limited criticisms of Labor were premised on the assumption that the ALP could be pressured in a more progressive direction. The party's promotion of Labor as “a lesser evil” was highlighted by the direction of its voting preferences to the ALP candidate.

The Greens' response to the Macquarie Fields clashes was particularly

revealing. While pointing to the underlying social disadvantage in the area, a Greens spokeswoman declared that the riots were “a wake up call” to the state Labor government. The huge police deployment in Macquarie Fields was not a mistake, however, but a conscious policy aimed at whipping up law-and-order hysteria in order to deflect attention from the social catastrophe its policies have created in such suburbs.

The Progressive Labour Party, a grouping of former Stalinists, trade union bureaucrats and Labor “lefts”, sought to win disaffected ALP voters by calling for a return to “real Labor values”. The diminishing effect of such appeals to Labor's supposedly golden past is indicated by the PLP's vote—less than one percent.

The SEP was the only party to campaign for a complete break from the two-party system and for a clear socialist perspective. In the midst of the plethora of candidates, the SEP's vote of 478 was a small, but significant result. Following the party's campaign in the 2004 election, this indicates that an important layer of workers and young people consciously supported a revolutionary socialist alternative and are actively considering the party's policies.

From the outset, the SEP insisted that the party's intervention was not about votes, but about ideas. Unlike our political opponents, we aimed at fostering the broadest possible discussion of the crucial issues facing working people. The SEP was the only party to hold public meetings in the electorate, to distribute a comprehensive election statement and to seek to reach as many layers within the area as possible.

In the aftermath of the campaign, the SEP calls on all those who voted for Mike Head to consider the implications of the election outcome. Hostility, protest and anger do not by themselves provide any political answers to the serious problems confronting working people. What is required is the building of an international party based on a scientifically worked out program and perspective to refashion society from top to bottom on socialist lines. We urge all our supporters to carefully study our program and apply to join the SEP.



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