

Australian Labor Party's "fresh face" masks a pro-war, corporate agenda

Mike Head

5 December 2006

Australian Labor Party federal MPs voted 49-39 yesterday to ditch their parliamentary leader Kim Beazley in favour of the party's foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd. What had been portrayed as a close contest became something of a stampede as the Labor MPs sniffed the message of the media owners: that a Rudd victory was essential to give Labor a "fresh face".

Thus far Rudd and his running mate, Julia Gillard, have largely confined themselves to empty clichés and platitudes. In his first statement as Labor leader, Rudd repeatedly said Australia was at a "fork in the road" on a series of issues, including the economy, manufacturing policy, workplace laws, climate change, education, health and federal-state relations. But behind these pat phrases is a very right-wing agenda.

For all the hype about Rudd and Gillard offering voters "new ideas" and "new style of leadership," their policies will not deviate one inch from Labor's support for the bogus "war on terror" and commitment to servicing the requirements of the corporate elite. In his first television interview as ALP leader last night, Rudd emphasised the three pillars of his leadership: "rock solid" adherence to the US military alliance; a "hard-line" stance on national security; and life-long support for "mainstream" and "conservative" economics.

By restating his allegiance to the US alliance, Rudd is making it plain that he is no less prepared than Beazley, or Howard, to back Washington's militarism as a means of furthering Australian strategic and economic interests. Like Beazley, he has cautiously called for the withdrawal of most Australian troops from Iraq. This is nothing but an attempt to exploit the deep popular opposition in Australia—as well as in the US and internationally—to the criminal invasion and the quagmire it has produced.

Far from opposing war, Labor proposes to redeploy the troops in NATO-occupied Afghanistan or to bolster Canberra's own US-backed neo-colonial interventions in the Asia-Pacific region, from East Timor to Tonga. Being "hard-line" on national security means endorsing the boosting of the military and security forces, and backing the barrage of "anti-terrorism" laws passed at state and federal levels since 2002 to strip away basic legal and democratic rights.

As for "conservative" economics, Rudd cited his record as chief of staff to Queensland Labor premier Wayne Goss and cabinet director-general from 1989 to 1995. Rudd earned the nickname "Dr Death" for his role in slashing thousands of public sector jobs, including 4,000 railway workers' jobs. "That's exactly the sort of work that I did," he declared.

A great deal of effort is being expended to portray the new Labor leader as a man of some compassion who rose from humble circumstances. He is, however, a former career diplomat and hard-

nosed political operator who has clawed his way up the Labor ranks by supporting and implementing its anti-working class policies. When, as a result of Labor's attacks on workers, Goss lost office in 1996, Rudd used his political connections to go into business for himself as a senior consultant for the accounting firm KPMG in China, before entering federal parliament, on his second attempt, in 1998.

Behind the scenes, Rudd has already made plain he will primarily attack Howard from the right, accusing him of retreating from the "free market" economic restructuring carried through by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983-96. Addressing right-wing thinktanks such as the Sydney Institute and the Centre for Independent Studies in recent months, Rudd said Labor would match Hawke and Keating in being prepared to bear "political pain" to produce "long-term policy gain for the nation," in contrast to the "opportunities squandered by the Howard government".

At the same time, in a concerted series of TV talkshow appearances, newspaper columns and magazine articles, Rudd has sought to present an alternative pitch for implementing the corporate agenda, explicitly nominating Christian ideology as a means of carrying it through. "Social democrats embrace the discipline of markets tempered by the demands of human decency," he wrote in an essay entitled "Faith in Politics" published by the *Monthly* magazine in October. In the magazine's November edition and an accompanying *Australian* column, Rudd called for "a new coalition of political forces" to unite those disturbed by Howard's "extremism" and "market fundamentalism".

Central to his platform are particular references to protecting "family values". His "coalition" is clearly oriented to right-wing parties, such as the church-based Family First party, as well as the Greens, the rural-based National Party and disaffected Liberals. Apart from the reactionary and divisive character of his appeal to Christianity, it is a fraud to claim that the market system can be "tempered" to cater for compassion, rather than private profit.

As for "human decency," it should be noted that in order to cultivate a Christian constituency, Rudd has already been seeking to outbid the Howard government in stirring up anti-Muslim hysteria. In October, for example, amid a concerted media witchhunt, Rudd advocated the criminal prosecution of Sydney Sheik Taj el-Din al-Hilali under anti-terrorism laws for supporting anti-occupation fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The stage-managed manner in which Rudd and Gillard won yesterday's ballot has nothing to do with popular sentiment, let alone democracy or defending the interests of working people. As the Beazley and Rudd camps frantically phoned MPs to push for their votes over the weekend, both the Murdoch- and Fairfax-controlled

newspapers published carefully concocted opinion polls strongly boosting Rudd.

The Fairfax poll reported that Rudd would take Labor's primary vote to 48 percent, compared to 41 percent under Beazley. Murdoch's Newspan said 48 percent of voters preferred Rudd and Gillard as Labor's leaders, compared to 27 percent for Beazley and his deputy, Jenny Macklin.

These poll results were largely manufactured by framing the questions to achieve the desired outcome—endorsement of Rudd and Gillard as a so-called “dream team” that could defeat Howard. Such is the alienation and disgust felt by ordinary people toward both major parties that there is little in the way of positive support for any of the political leaders. In so far as Rudd eclipsed Beazley in the polls, it was, like the choice between Labor and Liberal, between two unpalatable alternatives.

Rudd's installation—he becomes the sixth Labor leader since the Hawke-Keating government was routed in 1996—marks another attempt to breath life back into the moribund ALP. In the wake of the widespread antiwar sentiment expressed in last month's US Congressional elections, the media and corporate elites are concerned that opposition to the two-party system in Australia may take dangerous new directions. They are anxiously seeking to fashion Labor as a viable parliamentary opposition to Prime Minister John Howard's decade-old Liberal-National Coalition government.

These calculations were spelt out most crudely in the Fairfax chain's Melbourne *Age* editorial yesterday, which urged Labor MPs to opt for Rudd. “The federal Labor Party desperately needs new energy not only to reinvigorate itself, but the parliamentary process ... the public deserves, and democracy needs, a strong Opposition. Coming into the next election, a leadership team is needed that enunciates a clear direction and can take the fight to the government of the day.”

Murdoch's *Australian* welcomed Rudd's “emphatic victory” and lauded him for declaring that he would defy Labor's factions and insist on selecting his own frontbench. For those in ruling circles, one of Rudd's attractions is that he is not as closely tied as Beazley to the faction and trade union powerbrokers who run the hollowed-out shell of the Labor Party. *Australian* columnist Glenn Milne noted yesterday that Rudd has “no factional patrons”. There is an expectation that Rudd, like Tony Blair in Britain, will be able to operate more freely in advocating and implementing corporate interests.

Today's *Australian* editorial wasted no time in laying down the road that Rudd must follow: “find a more credible message for Labor” while “developing a new reform agenda” in the mould of the Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983-96. In essence, this means shaping a new image and forging a constituency to carry through what the Murdoch media has accused the Howard government of failing to pursue—an intensified assault on the jobs, working conditions, essential services and basic rights of working people to satisfy the dictates of the global financial markets.

The *Australian Financial Review* editorial noted that Rudd's nomination of “federalism” as needing fundamental reform signals his readiness to tackle a long-standing demand of the corporate elite—the sweeping away of state-based constraints on fully opening up health, education and other basic services to market “competition” and privatisation. Likewise, Rudd's reference to climate change is primarily designed to pave the way for “carbon trading” and other free-market policies under the guise of environmental protection.

Both the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Australian* expressed reservations about Rudd's mention of “industry policy” and also

warned Rudd to pull back from Beazley's vow to “rip up” the Howard government's deeply unpopular WorkChoices industrial legislation. Like Beazley, Rudd can be expected to assure employers that they can still use individual contracts to dismantle workers' job security and conditions. As for “industry policy,” it is not aimed at protecting jobs and conditions—it is a pitch to sections of the business establishment anxious for assistance to survive on global markets.

The intractable problem that has wracked not just Labor but the Howard government and the political establishment as a whole since Labor's crushing 1996 defeat is how to secure electoral support for a vicious free-market program that is inimical to the needs and interests of ordinary people.

The Hawke and Keating governments, in which Beazley served as a senior minister, worked hand in glove with the trade union bureaucrats to carry out the greatest ever redistribution of wealth away from the working class to corporate profit. In the quest to make Australian capitalism “globally competitive,” tens of thousands of manufacturing and public sector jobs were eliminated; long-standing working conditions, including the eight-hour day, were dismantled; basic infrastructure was privatised; social welfare was eroded; and real wages were driven down.

In 1996, Howard took office by posing as a champion of the “battlers” battered by Labor. Over the past decade, he has increasingly resorted to stoking fears and prejudices—anti-refugee witchhunting, the “war on terrorism” and a scare campaign on soaring interest rates—to divert attention away from his efforts to intensify the processes unleashed under Labor.

None of this would have been possible without Labor's essentially bipartisan backing. Even with Labor's assistance, however, the popular hostility to Howard has mounted, fuelled by the Iraq war, far-reaching attacks on basic legal rights, rising interest rates and the draconian WorkChoices laws. Yet, Beazley proved incapable of winning any real popular support or presenting a credible parliamentary opposition, either in his first term as Labor leader from 1996 to 2001, or after his unanimous recall in January 2005 following the spectacular demise of Mark Latham.

Almost exactly three years ago, in the lead-up to the 2004 election, Labor MPs dumped Beazley's equally discredited successor, fellow Hawke-Keating minister Simon Crean, to elect Latham in the hope of gaining media backing. Murdoch's newspapers, in particular, championed Latham's bid to revive the Hawke-Keating “economic reform” agenda. However, Latham's rhetoric, urging working people to “climb the ladder of opportunity,” failed dismally.

Three years on, Labor's MPs have installed another “fresh face” in a desperate effort to appeal for support from the media barons and claw their way back into office. For now, the editorials have placed Rudd and Gillard on probation. Today's *Australian* editorial warned that if they fail to deliver, their “honeymoon” will be brought to an “abrupt end”.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact