

WSWS interviews NSW voters

# Anger, resentment and discontent in Australian state election

**Our reporters**  
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The WSWS interviewed voters at polling booths in three electorates for the New South Wales state election last Saturday March 24. The overwhelming sentiments in the working class areas of Heffron, Marrickville and Newcastle were hostility to both major parties—Liberal/National and Labor—along with deep-going concerns about the general state of the world, the eruption of war, environmental crises and deteriorating social services.

While this was a state election, voters were quick to voice their opposition to the federal coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, particularly over its participation in the war in Iraq, its support for the five-year detention of Australian citizen David Hicks in Guantánamo Bay by the Bush administration, its draconian anti-terrorism laws and its WorkChoices industrial legislation.

There was general disgust at the state of health, education and transport in New South Wales, and most people who voted Labor did so out of fear that a state coalition government would be even worse.

Others said they voted for the Greens in order to register their opposition to both major parties. In general, however, they had little conviction that the Greens offered any real alternative, and expressed considerable resentment towards their decision to allocate preferences to Labor.

Heffron is a predominantly working class electorate, taking in much of the former industrial area between the city and Port Botany, as well as Sydney's Kingsford Smith airport. It includes the suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo, where there are large concentrations of low-income public housing; gentrifying suburbs such as Erskineville and Alexandria, where a number of students and younger professionals now live; to working class suburbs such as Mascot, Rosebery, Eastlakes and Kensington, where many southern European migrants settled in the postwar decades. The University of NSW is located on the eastern edge of the electorate. Much of Heffron is part of the federal seat of Kingsford Smith, where the SEP's candidate James Cogan stood in 2004 against former rock singer and high-profile Labor candidate Peter Garrett.

At the Alexandria booth, Leticia, a Brazilian woman with two young children, said she had received a copy of the election statement before election day and had voted for the SEP because she "thought there were already too many right-wing parties, so I wanted to encourage a left-wing party." Asked about the war in Iraq, she said: "I'm not sure if withdrawing is the best thing, but definitely the war is wrong. It's a confusing situation for normal people to know what to do." She said the US had lied about its "democratic" aims in the Iraq invasion, and spoke of her knowledge of US support for dictatorships in South and Central America.

Shaun, 35, a librarian, voted Greens 1, SEP 2. He spoke of the "incompetence" of the major parties, which he saw as no different from each other. There was an absence of "social justice" issues, and the parties

"just seem to be pursuing their own interest with developers." He was very disappointed the Greens did not preference the SEP, and was angry they had preferred Labor. "If we're switching more toward the Labor Party," he said, "then I'll have to reconsider voting Green in the future, because that's just a sell out, it's not standing up for principles."

A young couple said that climate change was the main issue. They thought it was a "difficult election to make a choice", with Labor and Liberal both unappealing and characterised by "careerist politics." They raised that "behind the sense of frustration that we both feel" was the fact that neither party was "driving any real change" and that the campaign was just "a hold-and-maintain policy to get re-elected."

Ben, a 30-year-old part-time engineer and part-time actor, said he had witnessed a "significant change for the worse" in both parties over the last 15-20 years. He thought the Greens, though, were "listening to people".

A woman who also voted Greens 1, SEP 2 explained that "Labor has just run the state into the ground, but the Liberals are worse. They didn't seem to have any policies, and we didn't really hear anything else from the other parties." She said the elections would not resolve anything and "it will just be more of the same, more of the same, more of the same—it's very depressing." She had already read the SEP election statement and thought the party was "very good and made a lot of sense". But she thought the radical change needed for the realisation of the SEP's program was so vast that it was simply "not practical" at the present time.

Another woman, 39-years-old, said the state ballot was "the most depressing election I have ever been a part of", where "Labor doesn't deserve to win again, but I think they will."

George, did not know the Greens had preferred Labor before he voted. When told by SEP supporters, he asked "then what's the point of voting, if all you can do is vote for Labor or Liberal?" He said the promises of the two main parties were all false and aimed solely at winning elections.

A 19-year-old woman, who works as a manager, commented to the SEP, "Labor says they are doing a lot for the younger generation, but I don't see it." She was supportive of the Greens' housing, education and environmental policies.

An Aboriginal woman, 18-years-old and voting in her first election, criticised the Labor government for its lack of "funding for youth groups," saying that none of the main parties would offer a real alternative for ordinary people, for whom things were "getting worse." She was critical of the Iraq war, which she saw as an "excuse for getting the oil and resources" of that country.

In Eastlakes, Ruhul Khal, from Sri Lanka said: "Most people think the old parties are no good anymore. People still think it is a democracy, but this is not democracy. For me the number one issue is the state of the world. The world is very shaky. I am also worried about racism."

Khal continued: “America is stealing the oil from other countries, and using its soldiers to gain from other countries, no matter how much we have protested.

“The capitalist countries want to dominate over the world. They want to make two classes—one is capitalist and the other is poor, with a big gap. Most people don’t accept this, but they cannot do anything. It is money and power. Everything is owned by the capitalists. It takes time, but the world should be changed. It cannot continue.”

Noel Matis, a self-employed electrical contractor, complained that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer... As long as we’ve got those two parties, we’re stuck with this system for ever more. This democracy only extends to voting one of those two parties in. After that, they can make laws or do whatever they want...”

Matis said he “voted for the Greens, even though I don’t know that much about them, because I am not happy with Labor and Liberal. There’s not much else to vote for. I could have voted socialist, but I’ve got to find out more about them. I’ve got to read more about what your policies are, and then I’ll have an idea.”

Retired electronics engineer, Joe Ferguson, told the WWSW that for him, the main issue was the war in Afghanistan and Iraq and that he “voted for James Cogan from the SEP. I read what he said and I quite agreed with it. All this big ballyhoo about terrorism. It’s all about the war in Iraq and siding with America. We should not be there. It is costing millions and millions, which I would rather see spent on old people and hospitals. It is sickening.

“I used to vote Labor before but I changed my mind because they are the same as the Liberals. There is nothing between them...”

Joe said that, as a retired person, it was not easy. “They should give us a decent living. Everything is getting dearer and dearer, yet our pension is stuck down at the bottom. The pensioners are forgotten. They want to make us all work longer, until we drop in a hole and finish. I have had seven or eight letters from the government asking me to go back to work. I am 72!”

For an Aboriginal woman from La Perouse, the key issue was that “nobody is addressing law and order and the social problems. NSW has more people in prison than ever before. Is that the answer?”

“What have the grassroots people, the little people, got? Nothing!”

She told the SEP campaigners: “I was looking at voting for the Greens, but I was also wondering where their preferences were going. If your party does not give preferences, I am really going to have a look at your policies.” While waiting in the queue to vote, she read the SEP’s election statement and then called out: “You got my vote!”

Danny Ibrahim, an IT worker and Labor voter, said that both Labor and Liberal were “out for the same thing—they just code it differently. For them it’s all just a big marketing campaign, it’s all PR work. I honestly don’t think they give a fig about anything, that is, except profits, turnover and superannuation packages.

“They’ve been doing it so long, I am surprised nobody has picked up on it yet. What struck me is the amount of money they spent on their campaigns. That money could have been spent on doing something for the country. For me the main issues were the state of the schools, and the state of the public hospitals.

Ibrahim said that he had just voted for Labor. “Why? It can’t be any worse than it is now can it? I don’t know. I just wanted to get in there to vote, and get out. I don’t think Labor is a lesser evil, I just voted for them for the heck of voting. I had no idea about your party. I’ll read your material now.”

The Marrickville electorate centres on the established working class suburbs of Dulwich Hill and Marrickville, and stretches into the gentrifying inner city areas of Newtown and Camperdown, where many professionals and university students live due to their proximity to the central business district and the University of Sydney. Because of the

relatively large Green vote in these areas in recent elections, the Greens focussed their lower house election campaign in Marrickville, in an attempt to win the seat from sitting Labor member, Education Minister Carmel Tebbutt. Marrickville was also the only Sydney seat in which the middle class protest organisation Socialist Alliance stood a candidate.

Scott, a property developer and former Australian Democrat voter, told SEP campaigners that he disagreed with Australian involvement in the Iraq war. “We should have never gone to Iraq... This not a war on terror. You can’t have a ‘war on terror,’ only a war on another nation. George Bush and company are a major problem for the world today.”

Commenting on the state elections, Scott said: “I feel disillusioned and intend to cast an invalid vote. There is no true democracy when you’re made to vote and whichever way you vote the major parties end up with it anyway. All the preferences flow to them.”

Asked about the education system he said, “To have to pay for education is simply wrong. When I went through university my education was free and it should stay that way. How are the kids who really want to, and should, attend university but can’t afford it, supposed to get in?”

Scott said: “Politics is no longer about the people but business and is conducted that way. For politicians, getting elected is about profitability, about getting more money.”

A nurse from a Sydney teaching hospital, who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of victimisation, said her main concerns were the Howard government’s industrial relations laws and climate change.

Natal Shekoush, a mental health support worker, said she agreed with the SEP’s central policies—for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, against militarism, the “anti-terror” laws and attacks on democratic rights.

“People need programs but they are too busy working to know what’s really going on politically. Naturally people do care about others, in Iraq and elsewhere, but are just not aware about what is going on.”

She said that the media was “brainwashing people on important issues. They focus on hating Islam, and ignore the real issues that people worry about.... And the “anti-terror” laws are disgusting. It means they can just hassle Middle-Eastern people more.”

She said that the recent Cronulla race riots “were completely media driven.... The government is just trying to divide people to cover over the real issues.

“People have to become aware, to get educated about what’s happening. We have to start by planting that seed [of awareness] in people’s heads, that’s a start.... At the moment, people feel they have no hope.”

Locksmith Nick Friedl, who is married with a young son, told the WWSW he was “disgusted with the arrogance” of the state Labor government.

“One of the major issues in this election was public transport. I’m fed up with the time that it takes to get from point a to point b. Trains and buses are cancelled without notice. You just don’t know when they will arrive.

“The public hospital system is also a mess and my young son will be going to school soon but the state school system is in a bad way.

“I don’t support the Liberals but all of this is the responsibility of the Labor government. Labor has had plenty of time to sort these things out, but nothing has really changed. Labor is meant to be a working class party and it is not doing anything for the public.

“In the last federal election I voted for Mark Latham and the Labor Party but a few months after that it became clear to me that it would have been a disaster. I started to realise that Labor is just not for the public. They say they are against the gas emissions and want to save the earth but instead of improving public transport, which is a cheap and effective way to cut pollution, they’ve cut the services.

“I came here last night and saw all the posters and plastic placards put up by the Labor Party. There are dozens of them but how much does all this cost? It’s just overkill. Do they have to ram things down people’s

throats?

"If Labor had done a good job, why would they have to spend all this money on advertising. Apparently they've spent over \$116 million on this campaign. If they'd put this into public transport, schools and hospitals you wouldn't see me complaining.

Friedl, who was wearing a "Bring David Hicks Home" t-shirt, said he was angry and concerned about the five-year detention in Guantánamo of the young Australian.

"I'm not an activist or campaigner on David Hicks—it's not a vote of approval for whatever he is supposed to have done—but what is happening to him is wrong and has to be stopped. My eyes have really been opened on this issue.

"If Hicks came from a wealthy family he would not just be there for five years without charge. This is a class issue.

"When you realise what has been going on in the last ten or fifteen years then you start to understand that something is fundamentally wrong with our society."

Toni Wilburton, a ceramic artist, told the WSWs she was concerned about climate change and the environment.

"The big issue for me is the damage being done to potable water supplies by long wall coal mining. I only found about the impact of this sort mining through a project I'm involved in and saw a film called *Rivers of Shame*. It describes the destruction this mining is doing to the Sydney catchments area and river system. It is really shocking. Rivers are being destroyed and the government knows it and is working with the companies to try and cover it up. The Hunter Valley is being devastated.

"People are completely uninformed about this. They just don't know and this is a real problem.

Wilburton went on: "The points your candidate [Patrick O'Connor] made at the climate change meeting [held at Marrickville Town Hall] were really important. He said it was completely spurious to tell people that if they had rainwater tanks and used their grey water on the garden it would make a difference, because no-one is told what the big corporations are doing. I agree there has to be a coordinated international solution.

"I must admit that the election is an alienating and unsatisfying experience. The Labor government has disempowered local communities and Frank Sartor [development minister] almost has feudal powers. This is very dangerous."

Asked about the anti-terror laws and escalating attack on democratic rights she said: "The government deliberately uses the issue of terrorism to make people afraid of each other and less willing to work with each other. Any laws that do that are retrogressive. This is an attack on human rights and freedom of action and is designed to block people from acting together."

Warbuton said the SEP should investigate all the issues facing working people and "develop case studies and independent investigations to demonstrate the need for its policies.

"People need real analysis on all the questions they're facing. If your organisation is doing that then this is a real step forward."

In Newtown, Judith, a bank worker, spoke to the SEP team after voting for Patrick O'Connor. She had received the SEP's election manifesto in her letter box and studied it.

"I voted for Patrick because your policies were very transparent. I think there is very little transparency these days. You advocated freedoms which I support, rights for working people and oppose discrimination. I am very opposed to the war in Iraq. I liked the fact that you made the war a main issue. I opposed the Vietnam War in the 1960s and history seems to be repeating itself. We need people like you who are trying to stop it. I tried to fix it up during Vietnam, I joined in the marches and demonstrations at the time. I can no longer march, I have to resort to voting now and I wanted to support someone who was against the war."

In neighbouring Erskineville, Stephanie Ward, a young actor who has

established her own theatre company, said she voted for the Greens. "With Work Choices, the Liberals' policies are just appalling. They're stripping everyone's rights. I've got a friend who signed an AWA, and he's my age, working for \$12.75 an hour. How do you live off that? Everyone is on the poverty line, everyone's just getting by, no-one can save any money... Basically I'm very worried about the Work Choices so that's why my vote went to the Greens."

Des Hayes, a plasterer who lives in a flat in Lewisham, said he had voted Liberal all his life but voted Labor in the state election out of disgust for the Howard government.

"Industrial relations laws have changed things around in the way of work. Everything is now open slather in the building industry and people just have to live with it. The unions don't have any rights or any say anymore."

Des explained that he was still on the same hourly rate, of about \$35 an hour, that he earned in 1999. Now, though, he regularly travelled three hours to Canberra to get plastering jobs because he could not find jobs in Sydney. He said that "unlike the politicians" he would have very little superannuation to retire on and would need to save.

Although he voted Labor, Des said he was dissatisfied with both the Labor and Liberal parties. "It is comfortable for them and they don't even have to consider what the electorate thinks, because there is no opposition. They just do what they like. There needs to be a third, fourth and fifth choice of government. In fact, we need to get rid of Labor and Liberal and start again.

"If I had my chance to tell them what I thought in parliament I would, but people like me never get to speak."

Patrizia said she voted for the Socialist Equality Party because she had read the SEP's statement and opposed the war in Iraq and the lack of decent jobs for young people. She has three children in their 20s living at home.

"Most of the jobs today are casual and people lose their discipline if they don't work full time. My children studied at university but then couldn't find jobs in their industries. One son studied environmental management but then couldn't find a job."

"It is the future of the youth that I am really concerned about. Many young people don't see a future. As you say, many could face a war in the future. I can tell you that I didn't raise my children for over twenty years to then send them to war to get shot at."

The electorate of Newcastle is centred on what was once one of Australia's major industrial cities, which has suffered massive job losses in steel and related industries over the past 15 years. The seat takes in suburbs surrounding the former BHP steelworks such as Mayfield, Waratah and Georgetown, as well as suburbs like Hamilton and Cooks Hill, where some urban renewal has taken place and numbers of students live who attend the University of Newcastle.

Kevin voted for Bryce Gaudry, who stood as an independent after resigning from the ALP after Labor's state executive ignored the local branch and appointed former radio announcer Jodi McKay as Labor's candidate.

"I am really angry about what happened. Like many Labor supporters in the area, I did not appreciate the undemocratic way the selection was carried out. It is typical of Labor and the leadership in Sydney. They ignore the wishes of people in the communities on all kinds of issues and favour the big developers and big business people."

Kevin said he had opposed Labor's attempt to close down the rail service into Newcastle that would have seen the rail corridor land merged with the foreshore. "We would have lost a vital service and the land would have been sold off to developers and not made available for public use."

Keith, a small businessman, also spoke out against the "law and order" campaign rolled out by the *Newcastle Herald*, and supported by all the

candidates except Noel Holt.

“Calling for more police is ridiculous,” Keith said. “What do they want—the same number of police as the population, one for one? The problem is social. It can only be overcome by creating an environment where people are not threatened by worsening conditions of life.

“Many problems, including violence, stem from drugs. Because of the way this society is structured, with growing unemployment and other social problems, drug dependency is bound to evolve.

“There should be a situation put in place where funding is made available to assist drug users to break with dependency. The program of help must be continuous. At the same time there needs to be jobs and training for young people.”

Keith said that his small business was not doing badly and he made a decent living but could not ignore the situation facing the majority of people in Australia and everywhere. “There is no doubt that there has to be a real change in society. Just look at the terrible situation that exists here and in countries around the world. Look at third world countries—there is still crisis and terrible poverty.

“This should not happen. It comes back to the same issue—there has to be funding and education made available, but governments everywhere are not providing this. There is money, but it is directed all the time to the top end of society. This needs to be reversed.”

Keith said he believed that it was important that the SEP had raised the question of the war in Iraq in the election. “It is wrong to be there. Howard is just a puppet for Bush and seems to do whatever the US demands. He says we need an alliance with the US to protect Australia. What have we got to be protected from?

“I am worried that the situation can lead to a much bigger conflict over oil and other resources. I don’t believe all the talk that the US is looking for a diplomatic solution. There are signs that things will only get worse.”

Many people who spoke to SEP campaigners at the polling booths in Newcastle said they had received and read the SEP’s statement, which was distributed to most households in the electorate in the course of the election campaign. Some said they would vote SEP while others said they had given Holt their second preference.



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