

Pitching for the right-wing Christian vote

Australia: Howard and Labor leader in censorship bidding war

Richard Phillips
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While the date of this year's federal election is yet to be announced John Howard's Liberal-National coalition and the Australian Labor Party have intensified their unofficial election campaigns, with appeals to Christian lobby groups and a bidding war over internet censorship and anti-terror legislation.

On August 9, Prime Minister John Howard and Labor leader Kevin Rudd appeared together on a special web cast organised by the Australian Christian Lobby, a right-wing outfit established by Jim Wallace, former head of Australia's Special Air Services (SAS). According to Wallace, the broadcast was seen by 100,000 Christians throughout the country.

While these figures have been disputed, the audience far exceeds the number of supporters the Labor and coalition parties are capable of mobilising for a public event. Neither party has any active mass membership to speak of. They are kept afloat by corporate media support and millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded electoral financing.

Support from new Christian parties and formations such as Family First, Hillsong Church, the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), Assembly of God and other right-wing groups, has therefore become a key electoral consideration. Howard has assiduously cultivated support from these layers over several years, and Labor leader Kevin Rudd is desperately trying to catch up. Since assuming the Labor leadership late last year, he has been widely promoted for his so-called "Christian values".

During the web cast, both politicians proclaimed their Christian sensibilities, mouthing platitudes about family, helping the poor, and so on. Howard said his politics were guided by the parable of the Good Samaritan, who had stopped to help a suffering neighbour, and of the Talents, which he described as a "free-enterprise parable", an appeal to any small business owners who might be

watching. He was applauded after pledging to maintain the Lord's Prayer at each day's parliamentary sittings and again when he reminded viewers about his government's laws banning gay marriage.

Rudd said that his religious faith provided a "compass point" for his personal and political life. Asked about his attitude to gay marriage, the Labor leader endorsed Howard's legally discriminatory and undemocratic laws, declaring: "I have a pretty basic view on this, as reflected in the position adopted by our party and that is, that marriage is between a man and a woman."

Howard's main pitch during the event was to announce a \$189 million program to block sexually-explicit content on the internet, a hot-button issue for Christian fundamentalists. Rudd, who was not prepared for the announcement, immediately voiced his agreement.

The prime minister claimed that the initiative was aimed at protecting children from pornography, violence and sexual predators. But like all government legislation purporting to defend the defenceless, the new measures are a smokescreen to disguise further attacks on basic democratic rights.

Under Howard's plan, which includes free internet filtering software for families and public libraries, education and awareness programs and a 24-hour hotline, the federal government will establish unprecedented censorship agreements with internet service providers (ISPs) to filter pornography and any other content it deems offensive or dangerous. Under current laws, ISPs that fail to remove or filter out "offensive content" can have their licenses revoked and be fined \$27,000 per day.

More than \$43 million will also be provided to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to increase its internet police from 35 to 90 over the next three years. And even more ominously, the Australian Communications and

Media Authority will receive funding for an additional 14 Internet regulators to develop new legislative proposals and to increase its current “black list” of sites that ISPs must block.

The expanded list will be developed in consultation with the AFP and include so-called terrorism web sites “upon prescription” by Attorney-General Philip Ruddock. Under the guise of protecting children, the government is therefore boosting its 1999 Online Services censorship laws to include those deemed to be supporting terrorist organisations or encouraging acts of terrorism.

While Rudd backed the measures during the Christian web cast, the following day Stephen Conroy, Labor’s media and communications spokesman, upped the ante, declaring that Howard’s measures did not go far enough.

Conroy endorsed government claims that the AFP’s Internet policing efforts were “under-funded” but called on the government to “go further and mandate ISP-level filtering.” If elected, he said, Labor would ensure that all local ISPs provided “clean feed” services, i.e., ISPs would be forced to filter services before supplying data to their Internet subscribers.

IT peak bodies denounced Canberra’s planned measures and those proposed by the Laborites as anti-democratic and unworkable, reporting that ISP filtering would dramatically slow Internet speeds in Australia, already far behind its competitors. The proposals are similar to those used by various regimes internationally—Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, China, Iran and South Korea—to ban access to anti-government web sites.

Howard’s new censorship initiative is intimately connected to the Classifications (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Amendment (Terrorist Material) Bill 2007, which is currently under discussion in the federal parliament. The bidding war between Howard and the Laborites over how best to censor web sites is being echoed in the discussions on Attorney-General Ruddock’s proposals.

Under Ruddock’s proposed amendments, any literature, films, DVDs or computer games that “might lead a person (regardless of his or her age or any mental impairment) to engage in a terrorist act” should be banned.

This broad-ranging legislation provides the government with the scope to seize any so-called “terrorist” material and/or shut down any web site that it considers might induce a mentally ill person to commit acts of terrorism or violence. Using the phrase “any mental impairment”, renders the measures entirely arbitrary and gives the

government a carte blanche to suppress almost anything it wants.

Brushing aside protests from the Australian Press Council, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney PEN, the international association of writers, Australian artists and various law associations including the Law Council of Australia, the federal Labor leadership has not only endorsed Ruddock’s proposals but, predictably, attacked the Howard government for being soft on terrorism.

Last June Labor’s shadow attorney-general Joe Ludwig denounced Ruddock for “taking too long to act” on so-called terrorist literature and DVDs and suggested that a purge of the Office of Film and Literature Classification Board (Australia’s official censorship body), was needed.

“The real problem,” he declared in a press release, was that the government’s Office of Film and Literature Classification Board, “considers that violent jihad and racial abuse of Jews is acceptable material for young Australian Muslim children of primary school age.” A change in the law “will not be of any assistance while the Howard Government’s hand picked board refuses to apply it.” Ludwig said.

The bipartisanship expressed by federal Labor towards the anti-terror and Internet censorship moves comes as no surprise. It follows the unwavering assistance provided to the Howard government by Australia’s state and territory governments—all controlled by Labor. Both parties fear the growing sense of disaffection and alienation felt by millions of people—especially the younger generation—towards the official political establishment. They are well aware that the Internet can provide not only an alternative source of news and analysis, but also the possibility of accessing political alternatives to the big business and pro-war policies of all of Australia’s parliamentary parties.



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