

Election defeat causes meltdown in Australia's Liberal and National parties

Peter Symonds

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The electoral rout of the Howard government at Saturday's poll has produced a political meltdown in the Liberal-National Coalition as an unseemly scramble begins for vacant leadership posts. A pall of demoralisation has settled over the ousted parties as defeated ministers, including the prime minister himself, clear out their parliamentary offices. Amid a host of advisers and other staff forced to look for new jobs, the hunt has begun for scapegoats.

The Liberal Party and its junior coalition partner, the rural- and regional-based National Party, are not only out of office at the federal level, but in all Australian states and territories. Taking the state and federal parliaments together, the Liberal Party now holds less than a quarter of the 600 parliamentary seats. The highest-ranking Liberal office holder in Australia is now Campbell Newman, the lord mayor of Brisbane, the country's third largest city.

Michael Kroger, former state president in Victoria, told SkyNews: "Let's not mince words here: we are in the worst position we have ever been in since R.G. Menzies founded the Liberal Party [in 1944]. We're in opposition in every state and federally. Robert Menzies would turn in his grave if he saw the position his beloved party is in today..." Kroger called for immediate organisational and structural reform around the country, but made clear he, personally, would not be lending a hand.

Faced with the prospect of years on the opposition benches, senior Liberal figures have rapidly bailed out. The most prominent—Peter Costello, former treasurer, deputy Liberal Party leader and Howard's anointed successor—set the ball rolling on Sunday with the shock announcement that he would not seek the party's leadership—a post he has coveted for years but was denied by Howard. "The time has come to open a new chapter in my life. I will be looking to build a career post-politics in the commercial world," he told the media the day after the election.

Former foreign minister Alexander Downer followed suit on Monday, declaring he, too, would not be seeking the post of Liberal leader, even on an interim basis while the party reorganised itself. He lamely told the press: "When I mentioned [contesting the leadership] to my family, I have to be honest with you, they were filled with horror." Downer was followed by Mark Vaile, who announced he would be stepping down as National Party leader, also "for family reasons". The Nationals suffered their worst ever result, with just 10 seats in the 150-seat lower house of parliament.

Only three Liberals have thrown their hats into the ring for tomorrow's leadership contest—former defence minister Brendan Nelson, ex-environment minister Malcolm Turnbull and former health minister Tony Abbott. The least likely to emerge victorious was Abbott—the longest serving of the three and the most closely identified with Howard and his policies. He withdrew from the race this afternoon.

The media appears be lining up behind Turnbull, a lawyer, merchant banker and multimillionaire, who has only been in parliament since the federal election in October 2004. In a column in Murdoch's *Australian* today, entitled "The Liberal future lies with Turnbull", editor-at-large Paul Kelly called for Turnbull as leader to "accept Labor's revised industrial relations settlement; support Kyoto ratification; defend the Howard economic record and go on the offensive on indigenous issues."

Like a number of other political pundits, Kelly offers the trite explanation that Howard was responsible for the government's defeat because he stayed too long in office, failed to embrace "generational change" and should have handed over to Costello last year. If that had happened, so the logic goes, the Liberals would have been able to offer their own "vision for the future" to counter Rudd's appeal and possibly cling to power.

This rationalisation ignores the depth of popular hostility towards the Howard government over a broad range of issues: from the Iraq war and the lies used to justify it, to its regressive social policies on welfare, education and health, to its treatment of Guantánamo Bay detainee David Hicks, the destruction of workers' rights and conditions under its WorkChoices legislation and its disdain for looming environmental disasters.

Overwhelmingly voters used the poll on Saturday to register their disgust with the Coalition government. Had Costello replaced Howard last year, they would have done the same. And this was not a positive vote for Rudd's "vision"—which is virtually indistinguishable from that of Howard. Labor capitalised on anger at WorkChoices, but its own industrial relations policy retains almost every aspect of the Liberals' laws. Rudd exploited environmental concerns, by promising a sop: to ratify Kyoto—a measure demanded by sections of business keen to cash in on carbon trading and renewable energy technology.

The "Howard left it too late" theory is advanced by those who once hailed Howard as a political colossus and have been at a loss for months to explain why voters failed to respond to all his old tricks: lavish pork barrel promises, alongside the whipping up of

racial prejudice and scares over terrorism and the economy. An article in yesterday's *Age* noted that "the media pack just missed the bus". "Rather than see the prime minister as losing touch with the electorate and fatally overreaching on industrial relations, most journalists kept waiting for him to repeat what was seen as the miraculous 2004 victory," it noted.

In fact, the media and political establishment is completely blind to the preoccupations, concerns and needs of ordinary working people. Enjoying the benefits of the "economic good times", they are organically incapable of acknowledging that their free market nostrums have generated widespread hardship. Having embraced Rudd as the means for imposing the next wave of "micro-economic reform", Kelly advises Turnbull to cleave closely to Labor as the means for reviving the Liberal Party's fortunes.

"In overall strategic terms the Liberal Party should track very close to Rudd. He is the popular winner shaping a new agenda and style," Kelly wrote. "Much of this agenda is natural Liberal Party territory. It would be absurd therefore, for the Liberals to engage in warfare or difference maximisation with Rudd. The Liberals need to learn from the Kevin 07 masterclass: neutralise your negatives by accepting your opponent's policies, pick your fights selectively, wait for mistakes, inflate small differences into great principles."

That the right wing and deeply reactionary Murdoch media celebrate Rudd's agenda as "natural Liberal Party territory" should sound a sharp warning of what is in store for the working class under the new Labor government. It also points to the future potential for a grand coalition of Labor with the Liberals, or a Liberal faction, particularly under conditions of social upheaval.

Sections of the Liberal Party are already calling for the junking of Howard's key policies. The outgoing workplace relations minister Joe Hockey declared yesterday that "WorkChoices is dead" and called on the Liberals not to obstruct Rudd's alternative law in the Senate. Turnbull has done likewise and, following the advice from Murdoch's morning editorial, has also suggested that the Liberal Party under his leadership would support the Kyoto ratification and a formal apology to Australia's indigenous population.

Whatever the outcome of tomorrow's leadership ballot, the result will only intensify political brawling within the Liberal Party, which is riven with intense factional rivalries. The membership of both the Liberal and Labor parties has been haemorrhaging over the past two decades amid rising hostility to the policies of both. According to one 2002 study, the Liberals' NSW branch, the largest in the country, had only 6,000 members and two-thirds of those were aged 65 or older. As a result, the party has become increasingly dependent on the active support of Christian fundamentalists and right-wing zealots, and prone to branch stacking and other organisational dirty tricks.

The suggestion that the Liberal Party should dump its commitment to the WorkChoices legislation has already provoked sharp opposition. Liberal parliamentarian Wilson Tuckey told the media yesterday that he was "very vigorously" opposed to such a move and that "a meeting recently held of all West Australian Liberals expressed the same point of view". "A leader that wants to scrap any of the policies that we've created and defended at the

election, will not have my support," he said. The Liberal Party had its strongest result last Saturday in Western Australia, the state at the centre of the "China resources boom".

Infighting in the NSW branch is certain to intensify as the right-wing Christian fundamentalist faction, headed by David Clarke, opposes any attempt to project a more socially progressive image. Moreover, just days after the election, a leadership challenge has erupted in Queensland, where the Liberal Party suffered its most serious reversal. The Liberal group in state parliament, which consists of just eight MPs, is split into two hostile camps over last year's debacle in the state election.

Tensions have also erupted between the Liberal Party and its National Party coalition partner. While some parliamentarians have renewed the call for the formation of a single party nationally, Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce is insisting that the party choose a leader who will "stand up to" the Liberals. But it is not yet clear who is interested in the post. Political commentator Michelle Grattan wrote in the *Age* yesterday: "As for the Nationals, who continue in their decades-long dying process, their story is told simply. Last night, Warren Truss and Peter McGauran, both outgoing cabinet ministers, were still considering whether to stand for the vacancy Vaile is leaving. Being leader of the Nationals in the next three years is not a job to die for."

The Liberal Party is not particularly different. Its shrunken membership has left it heavily dependent on state electoral funding and the perks of office to provide jobs for party officials. Now out of office at the federal level, as well as in every state, the Liberal Party machinery is starved of resources and, given the extraordinary level of bipartisanship in every policy area, no obvious political strategy for getting them back. When Howard came to office in 1996, the Liberal Party held power in every state except NSW. Following Saturday's defeat, he leaves behind a party in such a state of rot that it may not even last, at least in its present form, to contest another federal election.



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