

Australia: Election slogans spark wave of disgust

Nick Beams
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Less than a week into the Australian federal election campaign, the hollowed out and atrophied character of the entire system of bourgeois parliamentary democracy is being increasingly exposed.

According to liberal theory, elections are the means by which “the people”, having heard and considered the policies of the various parties and their leaders, get to make their decision on the next government and its program. This mythology of “popular sovereignty” had already suffered a body blow with the June 23-24 political coup that deposed the elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, before he had completed even his first term in office. Now it is being further undermined by the election campaign itself.

The most significant event of the campaign’s opening days has been, not the announcement by the major parties of their policies and program, much less the clash of ideas and argument, but the wave of boredom, revulsion and, in some cases, outright anger that has greeted the endless series of empty slogans trotted out by the party leaders.

Launching the federal election campaign last Saturday, Prime Minister Julia Gillard used the phrase “moving forward” at least 39 times in a press conference lasting 31 minutes.

Questioned about her repeated use of the mantra in a television interview on Monday, Gillard could only respond with another series of hackneyed phrases, declaring that “moving forward” expressed her optimism about the future and reflected her view that the best days of Australia lay in front of it, not behind.

Such widespread popular hostility to the campaign is symptomatic of deeper processes, and it is raising concerns within sections of the corporate media about the stability of the two-party system itself. In an editorial published last Saturday, before the campaign

had officially begun, the *Sydney Morning Herald* dubbed Gillard the “hollow woman”. It followed this up with an editorial on Monday, entitled “The hollow woman beats a hollow drum”, warning that young people were becoming alienated from the entire parliamentary establishment.

“Anecdotal evidence from campuses and other centres of youth suggests that Australia’s young are turning off both Labor and the Coalition, towards the Greens if anything.” While noting that the Greens’ election deals with Labor meant such opposition was being channeled back into the framework of the two-party system, the editorial writers were clearly expressing fears that oppositional sentiments could soon assume a more overt form.

These themes were also voiced in an editorial in the *Australian* on Monday which noted that “Australia goes to the polls arguably more jaundiced towards its political class than at any time in recent history” and that “there is scarcely a centimetre between the parties on many issues.”

In an interview with the Labor government’s treasurer Wayne Swan, veteran journalist Laurie Oakes contrasted the present campaign with that conducted by the Labor Party under Gough Whitlam in 1972. Describing Labor’s “It’s time” slogan as the “best ever”, he added: “But Gough Whitlam didn’t sit there in every speech and say ‘it’s time’, ‘it’s time’, it’s time’, he actually treated us as intelligent human beings who could understand sentences and policies.”

Today’s election campaign is characterised by what one commentator aptly described as “dog training” techniques.

The source of the difference lies in objective conditions. In 1972, at the tail-end of the post-war economic boom, Whitlam and the Labor Party

advanced a program of social reforms. None of these measures even remotely challenged the foundations of the profit system, nor were they intended to, but they did represent certain, albeit limited, advances for the broad mass of the working class.

As the global economic crisis of 1974-75 took hold and the post-war boom came to an abrupt end, the Whitlam government, after failing to halt the unprecedented upsurge of the working class that followed the Liberal government's ousting in 1972, was itself thrown out in 1975 in a CIA-backed coup, carried out by the governor-general. The economic and political landscape then underwent a series of profound changes.

Far from pursuing a program of reform, the Hawke-Keating Labor government, which came to power in 1983, began a program of "economic restructuring" and attacks on the social conditions of the working class in line with policies initiated internationally under President Reagan in the US and Tory Prime Minister Thatcher in Great Britain. No party has championed a social reformist program since then.

In fact, over the past three decades the very concept of "reform" has undergone a kind of Orwellian transformation. Previously, "reform" referred to policies that raised the living standards of the general population—a universal health care system and free university education, for example, were two key policies initiated by Whitlam. Today, like Orwell's "war is peace" slogan, economic reform signifies the ever-greater subordination of social life to the dictates of the capitalist market—resulting in the scrapping of social advances, privatisation, and instituting the principle of "user pays" for what were once guaranteed social services.

Continuous free market "reforms" over the past two and half decades have been responsible for creating myriad social and economic problems. The response of both Labor and the Liberal-National coalition has been two-fold: to try to divert social anger into hostility against immigrants and refugees, under the banner of "border protection", while, at the same time, reducing the level of political discussion in the campaign to meaningless platitudes.

There is a definite political purpose to this campaign. Under conditions of a deepening global crisis of the capitalist system, with the financial markets and

institutions demanding ever more savage austerity measures, neither of the major parties can discuss their real economic and political agenda. As for the Greens, they have pledged to provide "stability" to the next government, whether Labor or Coalition.

The fact, however, that the campaign has produced such popular revulsion is indicative of other, no less significant, political processes. Empty sloganeering and determination to stay "on message" was not pioneered by Gillard—it was the central feature, after all, of Kevin Rudd's Labor campaign in 2007. But at that time, it was subsumed under the movement to oust the Howard government.

The three years since then have delivered a series of shocks to popular consciousness. Notwithstanding all the efforts to promote the doctrine of Australian exceptionalism, the global capitalist crisis has begun to reveal to millions of people that their jobs, their livelihoods, their democratic rights and the future of their children are being threatened by forces over which they have no control. They understand that these problems cannot be addressed by the endless repetition of vacuous slogans.

The answers they seek will not be found in the bankrupt official political establishment but only in the global analysis of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the program of socialist internationalism being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in the Australian election campaign.

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