

Australian voters throw Howard government out of office

By Patrick O'Connor
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The Australian Liberal-National coalition government was thrown out of office in Saturday's federal election. The anti-government sentiment was so strong that it claimed the scalp of Prime Minister John Howard himself, who lost his northern Sydney seat of Bennelong after having held it for 33 years. This is the first such defeat for a sitting prime minister since 1929.

Howard was joined on the chopping block by a number of other senior government ministers, all victims of a large swing to the Labor Party in certain electorates. With almost 80 percent of the vote counted, the Labor Party secured 44 percent of the primary vote, an increase of 6.3 percent from the 2004 election, against the Liberals' 36.4 percent (down 4.5 percent) and their rural-based coalition partner, the Nationals, on 5.4 percent (down 0.5 percent). The Greens won 7.6 percent of the vote, up 0.4 percent from 2004.

After the distribution of preferences, the two-party preferred result was 53.3 percent to 46.7 percent against the government, a "swing" from the last election of 6.1 percent. This is the second largest election day shift in post-World War II history, behind only the vote against the Whitlam-led Labor Party in the aftermath of the Canberra coup of 1975. While a number of electorates remain undecided, Labor is predicted to win a total of 88 parliamentary seats (up from 60) against just 60 (down from 86) for the government.

The vote represents a decisive repudiation of the Howard government's record of lies and criminality. While the Iraq war, and the eruption of US militarism in the Middle East and Central Asia, was deliberately excluded from the official campaign, there is no question that popular antiwar sentiment fuelled the overwhelming mood for change. Howard's defeat marks the demise of the last remaining partner of US President Bush in the "coalition of the willing" that carried out the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

For millions of ordinary people, Howard's humiliation at losing his own seat was just deserts for a man widely recognised as guilty of monstrous crimes. These include not only the war crimes relating to his participation in the US-led attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan, but also those arising out of his brutal immigration and refugee policies, including the 2001 sinking of the "SIEV X" asylum seeker boat, which resulted in the deaths of 353 men, women and children.

Saturday's vote was also driven by widespread hostility to the Howard government's attacks on wages and conditions. The biggest swings against the government were recorded in large working class areas as well as in rural and regional districts. Young people, welfare recipients, and immigrants were among those who overwhelmingly cast their ballots against the government. Howard's WorkChoices industrial relations policy was deeply unpopular, while a series of interest rate rises over the past three years has made housing

increasingly unaffordable for working people, particularly as other costs of living such as fuel and food have skyrocketed.

In a number of states and regions, the anti-government swing was far larger than the national average of 6.1 percent.

In Queensland, the swing was 8.3 percent, ranging from an average of 4.6 percent in inner Brisbane to 10.2 percent in rural areas. According to the *Australian*, the shift among these "sun-belt" voters was motivated, above all, by opposition to the government's industrial relations and welfare measures: "Blue-collar workers, dual-income families, the under-35s and single mothers are the key demographic blocs that turned against John Howard and his Coalition government... Labor sources said the coalition's [anti-union] attack ads backfired because they reminded voters about WorkChoices".

Among the government ministers who lost their seats were the National Party's De-Anne Kelly, the minister for transport and regional services, who suffered a 13.5 percent swing in her central Queensland seat of Dawson and Mal Brough, the indigenous affairs minister who orchestrated the military-police intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. An 11 percent swing delivered his outer Brisbane electorate of Longman to Labor.

The Howard government also lost significant seats in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales. Particularly large were the anti-government swings in the working class suburbs of western Sydney. In Parramatta, the shift was 8.1 percent, while in Lindsay it was a massive 10 percent. These electorates were among those that Howard first won in 1996, after he appealed to hostility towards the pro-business economic reform agenda advanced by the Keating Labor government. In this election, "Howard's battlers", as the media has termed Liberal-voting workers with home mortgages, decisively turned against the government.

The anti-Howard shift in Lindsay was driven as well by the exposure on the eve of the election of an extraordinary dirty tricks racist campaign orchestrated by the Liberal Party. A number of senior Liberal figures, including the husband of retiring Lindsay MP Jackie Kelly, were caught letterboxing leaflets purportedly issued by an Islamic fundamentalist organisation encouraging a Labor victory.

"We gratefully acknowledge Labor's support to forgive our Muslim brothers who have been unjustly sentenced to death for the Bali bombings," the bogus leaflet, signed in the name of the non-existent Islamic Australia Federation, read. "In the upcoming federal election we strongly support the ALP as our preferred party to govern this country and urge all other Muslims to do the same."

The crude attempt to incite anti-Muslim prejudice badly backfired, with the story dominating the media on the final day of the election campaign and forcing Howard to declare that those responsible would

be punished. Many voters interviewed by the media reported that the incident only confirmed their perception that nothing the Howard government said could be trusted. The episode also fuelled suspicions that the Liberals were desperately attempting to subvert the election outcome. In the final week, Howard's campaign spokesman Andrew Robb had threatened to mount a legal challenge to the right of 13 Labor candidates to stand, on the anti-democratic and spurious basis that they had not complied with a constitutional requirement to resign from their government-paid positions before the campaign commenced.

It appeared that the bogus Islamic leaflet cost the government the votes of many immigrants, and was a likely factor in Howard's Bennelong defeat. His electorate is home to large Chinese and Korean minorities, who were assiduously courted by the Labor Party's candidate, former ABC journalist Maxine McKew.

The outcome in the Senate is yet to be determined, with the complex state-based quota electoral system relying on the full distribution of preferences. The coalition is predicted to lose two upper house seats, leaving it with 37 of the total 76 places and Labor is expected to gain four, giving it 32 seats. The Greens will make a net gain of at least one seat, finishing with a total of five, while South Australian anti-poker machines campaigner Nick Xenophon won a seat as an independent. The Democrats—a party that has never recovered from its decision to support the Howard government's Goods and Services Tax in 2001—has been wiped out, losing two more seats.

The election outcome has left the coalition parties in a deep crisis and thrown the very viability of the Liberal Party into doubt.

For the first time in its history, the Liberal Party does not hold office at any level, either federal or state. Treasurer Peter Costello, whom Howard publicly anointed as his successor in his concession speech on Saturday night, yesterday announced he would not accept the leadership. He would remain, he said, on the backbench before quitting politics ahead of the next election. Costello's decision is symptomatic of the demoralisation gripping coalition ranks. The scale of its defeat means it faces years in the political wilderness. Corporate donations will quickly dry up, leaving the party in a precarious financial situation, while acrimonious faction fights between the Christian fundamentalist-aligned right wing, and the more socially liberal "wets" are expected to intensify.

The National Party is in similar disarray, with the 2007 election marking a further stage in its protracted decline. Party leader Mark Vaile suddenly announced today that he will resign the leadership.

While the Labor Party has been the immediate beneficiary of the widespread sentiment for change, the election outcome does not express any groundswell of support for Rudd or his policies.

The vote was *against* the government, not *for* the Labor Party. With a national primary vote average of 44 percent, Labor relied on Greens' preferences to get through in a large number of seats. The Greens won a significant proportion of the youth vote, particularly in inner city areas. In the electorate of Sydney, for example, they received 21 percent, in neighbouring Grayndler 18.5 percent, and in Melbourne 22.6 percent. Many people were determined to get rid of the government, but still could not bring themselves to directly vote Labor—only giving them a second preference after first voting Green.

Rudd has benefitted from a deepening oppositional political shift that he did nothing to support or encourage. His election campaign was focussed on making a pitch to the media and big business based on promises that Labor would launch the next wave of "free market" economic restructuring—something that the Howard government had

proved unable to deliver.

Having backed a Rudd victory, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* made its expectations clear in its editorial today, entitled "Rudd should stay on track". The national newspaper warned that Labor had to stick to its promises and "deliver more of the same economic management strategies the previous government gave us". It explicitly warned Rudd against any attempt to satisfy the expectations of those who had voted against Howard's industrial relations and welfare measures, particularly working people who were "not especially affluent or interested in radical social reform but are fearful that the bounty of the boom is passing them by".

Rudd has made crystal clear that he intends to press ahead with his right-wing agenda. His victory speech on Saturday night featured a fulsome tribute to Howard and his "service to public life". The next day, Rudd revealed he had already spoken with US President Bush and reaffirmed his full commitment to the Australian alliance with US imperialism.

The working class will soon come into conflict with the new Labor government, directly posing the need to build its own political party. Herein lies the significance of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign. The SEP advanced the only independent political perspective for the working class, and fought to clarify both the current and historical role of the Australian Labor Party and the unions as the key props of bourgeois rule. We explained that Rudd Labor in no way represented a "lesser evil" to Howard and that it would rapidly emerge as even more ruthless in prosecuting the interests of corporate Australia at the direct expense of the working class.

The SEP received a small but important vote in the nine House of Representatives electorates where we stood candidates, as well as significant support in the Senate in NSW and Victoria. Our total vote is yet to be finalised and will be reported on the *World Socialist Web Site* in a forthcoming comment.

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Visit the Socialist Equality Party Election Web Site

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