

Australia: Howard's overboard - but the struggle continues

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The Socialist Alliance "Howard Overboard" election night party in Green Left Weekly's offices in Sydney spontaneously spilled into the streets when John Howard conceded defeat. Jubilant activists celebrated with chants, whistles and pots and pans in a lap around the block which drew out people from their homes. A right-wing government that has plagued Australia since 1996 has been defeated and we have much to celebrate.

Most of all we have to celebrate the people's power that was mobilised to defeat the Howard government over the last three years.

There can be no doubt that it was the outrage at attacks on workers' rights and the resistance to "Work Choices" — that crude euphemism that was the official name for the biggest attack on workplace rights won over a century of workers' struggle — that helped finish off the Howard government.

The hundreds of thousands of people who took to the streets against Work Choices spoke for the majority of people. They were dismissed by Howard and they remembered his ruthless arrogance on election day. Many trade unionists spread out through the suburbs of the major cities to campaign against the Howard government during the election campaign in one of the biggest electoral campaign mobilisations organised by the trade union movement in many years, most building the vote for Kevin Rudd's Labor.

The tens of thousands who marched on in the Walk Against Warming demonstrations on and around November 11 also helped bury the Howard government. The great majority of Australians who want serious action to address global warming was another majority arrogantly dismissed.

The thousands who defied the police-state conditions to take to Sydney's streets when US President George Bush came to Sydney for the APEC summit in September also symbolised the majority who dissent over the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the associated war on civil liberties. This was another nail in Howard's coffin.

Such was the popular backlash that Howard looks set to lose even his own parliamentary seat in Bennelong to Labor's Maxine McKew, who won 45.9% of the first preferences counted on election night. The preferences from the Greens' 5.4% should assure Howard is ousted from the seat. It would be the first time a sitting prime minister has lost his seat since 1929.

But our celebrations should not blind us to the fact that the trade unions and other progressive movements will have to continue mobilising to push the incoming Rudd Labor government to deliver on its promises to rip up Work Choices, bring the troops home from Iraq and take action on climate change.

Already there is a gap between the promises Rudd has made and the reasons why people voted for Labor. On Work Choices, the Rudd version of "ripping up" will leave in place many elements of the

Howard government's attack on workers and their right to organise. Labor has no serious program to tackle climate change and implement the kind of "renewables revolution" that we need — and Rudd's vision for sustainability includes a place for coal, one of the worst greenhouse-gas generating fuels. Rudd's policy is to maintain troops in the Middle East, withdrawing only combat troops from Iraq (and even that will have to wait until mid-2008). Moreover the US-led war in Afghanistan continues to have the blessing of Labor's leaders, despite most Australians wanting troops withdrawn.

Rudd has told us that he is an "economic conservative" and experience tells us that economic conservatism = social and environmental vandalism. That's a lesson we cannot ignore after three decades of bipartisan support for the corporate profits-first agenda, demonstrated in action by federal and state governments (all of which are conservative Labor governments).

On election night Rudd congratulated Howard for his "extensive contribution to public service in Australia" and declared it time to "put aside the old battles of the past" between business and unions, between "growth and environment", "public and private".

"I extend our greetings tonight to our great friend and ally the United States", Rudd said in his victory speech and right-wing US President George Bush reciprocated by issuing a statement overnight congratulating Rudd on his victory.

"The United States and Australia have long been strong partners and allies and the President looks forward to working with this new government to continue our historic relationship", the statement said.

Labor's 6.3% swing was a strong endorsement for change but voters attached a note indicating which way they want his government to move by delivering a strong vote to the Greens, the most progressive party currently represented in federal parliament. The Greens look set to win at least two extra Senate positions.

Socialist Alliance national coordinator Dick Nichols told GLW that it was movement's against Howard's policies, in particular those against Work Choices and the pulp mill in Tasmania, that made sure the Howard government was smashed. "The Socialist Alliance played a big role in building these movements, and did well in those seats where that work was most visible", he said.

Nichols said there had been modest increases in the vote for alliance candidates in the Sydney seats of Grayndler, Parramatta and Blaxland, the Wollongong-based seat of Cunningham and the western Melbourne seat of Gellibrand. This is a result of the alliance's role as a builder "on the ground" of the movements that helped defeat the hated Howard government.

The Socialist Alliance congratulated the Greens on their good result and pledged to continue to work as partners in building the progressive movements. Many progressive-minded people gave their first preference vote to the Greens because they see them as having the best chance to win parliamentary seats at this time, said Nichols, but a number have sought to triple the value of their vote by voting "1" Socialist Alliance and "2" Greens.

More detailed reports on how the Socialist Alliance candidates did in the elections will be published in the next issue of GLW.

The election outcome was a massive rejection of Howard and everything his government stood for (regardless of Labor's unctuous "me-tooism"). One illustration of this was Mal Brough's failure to win re-election. Brough was Howard's notorious minister for Indigenous affairs who led the jackbooted military invasion of Northern Territory Indigenous communities (which, shamefully, was

supported by Rudd Labor) — his defeat at the ballot box was a rejection by voters of the racist attack on Indigenous people and land rights. To make the changes that the majority of Australian voters have made clear they want is still going to take a fight — dumping Howard was just the beginning.

P.S.

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