Australia: a backward victory

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The re-election of John Howard as Australia's prime minister has been described as a "wave of xenophobia." In reality, it owes as much to the failure of the opposition to articulate a fresh vision for the country, says Peter Browne.

About the author

Peter Browne is editor of Inside Story at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. The early November general election in Australia was the first in a major western country since the events of 11 September and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. It was held in the aftermath of a severe humanitarian and diplomatic crisis over the government's refusal to admit a huge boatload of refugees wanting to claim asylum (many of them from Afghanistan and Iraq).

During a tense stand-off, as the country's relationships with Norway, its Asian neighbours, the UN, and even the tiny Pacific island state of Nauru came under the microscope, Australia's self-image as a progressive, multicultural, global nation was passionately contested. At the end of the process, the socially conservative government of John Howard was re-elected with an increased majority. Does this result augur a political pattern likely to be repeated elsewhere in a newly fearful world?

By the beginning of the last week of the election campaign, the strategy of John Howard, the prime minister and Liberal party leader, was beginning to fray. Labor leader Kim Beazley was winning the campaign on domestic issues – health, education, the government's contentious goods and services tax – and Howard was under attack from his own side over his attempt to turn the campaign into a referendum on asylum seekers.

Former prime minister Malcolm Fraser described Howard's refugee strategy as "idiotic", former party leader John Hewson accused him of manipulating prejudice, and former Liberal minister Ian McPhee was campaigning for an opposition candidate in Victoria. Labor hadn't completely closed the gap in the polls, but it had a real chance of reversing the strong lead Howard had opened up since his tough stand against the New Zealand vessel, the Tampa, and the terrorist attacks on 11 September.

Then came news, two days before the election, which should have sealed Howard's fate. For weeks the government had been claiming that in early October, adults among a boatload of asylum seekers had thrown children into the sea in order to force Australia to allow the vessel to dock. Immigration minister Philip Ruddock called it "one of the most disturbing practices I've come across. It was clearly planned and premeditated."

Producing photographs which allegedly showed the children being rescued by the Navy, defence minister Peter Reith took up the theme: "It is an absolute fact, children were thrown in the water." Here, allegedly, was graphic evidence that the asylum seekers were exactly the sort of people Australia didn't want. There was just one problem: there is no proof that the incident ever took place.

The trap of toughness

The story had begun to unravel in early November with reports from Christmas Island that naval crew had disputed the government's claim. Then, on 8 November, the head of the Navy revealed that an unreleased video tape, supposedly containing evidence of the incident, actually showed no such thing – at best, there was inconclusive footage which may have shown a man threatening to throw a child overboard. By this time it was clear that the photographs released earlier by Reith may well have been taken during the transfer of adults and children to the Adelaide.

These revelations should have helped Labor's prospects enormously. Yet the voting figures suggest that they didn't give the opposition any significant boost; instead, the return of the asylum seekers as an election issue might even have helped the government. For Beazley, as he contemplates life on the backbench, there's a bitter lesson in these events.

Part of Labor's problem in responding to the government's refugee policies was a legacy of the previous Labor government, which established the system of mandatory 24-hour-a-day detention of unauthorised asylum seekers in 1992. Labor's immigration minister at the time argued - in terms the current minister Philip Ruddock has used repeatedly - that the government was determined to send "a clear signal" to would-be asylum seekers that they should think hard before making spurious claims for protection in Australia. Located in remote regions of the country, the detention centres didn't attract much attention until boat arrivals began to increase in 1999. The coalition government had brought in a private correctional company to run the centres, and now it embarked on a series of legislative changes and exerted covert pressure on the Refugee Review Tribunal aimed at tightening the refugee determination process.

Labor resisted some of the government's more extreme proposals, but failed to develop a coherent response to Ruddock and Howard's increasingly tough policy and extravagant rhetoric. Asylum seekers, once referred to as boat people, were now 'illegals' and 'queue jumpers' in the government's terminology, and the Labor leadership offered no opposition. Ruddock misused statistics and misrepresented Australia's performance in taking refugees, but again there was no counter-argument from Beazley. Ruddock's distortions increasingly set the terms of the debate.

So when the Tampa picked up over 400 asylum seekers from their ailing vessel in late August, Beazley was trapped. Less than two months from the likely election date, he had the choice of falling into line with a seemingly popular government policy, a drawing of the line following a rise in unauthorised arrivals, or spelling out an alternative and inevitably more complex – and electorally risky – approach.

On the evidence of talkback radio calls and coverage in the tabloid press, the issue was tapping into long-standing fears in the community, and Beazley decided to back the government. Although Labor took the risk of rejecting the government's first, draconian border protection bill, it agreed to a series of less extreme measures. Even the attempt to draw some sort of line landed Beazley in trouble, as Howard repeatedly and very effectively described Beazley as 'flip-flopping' on the issue.

Labor lacks a story

The terrorist attacks of 11 September only served to heighten a generalised sense of insecurity, not just caused by asylum seekers but also by the negative effects of globalisation. Defence minister Reith, never fastidious about means and ends, attempted to hammer home the point by mentioning the possibility that terrorists could be attempting to reach Australia by boat. It's impossible to say what would have happened if Labor had developed a strong alternative policy much earlier. The Greens, a small party with one senator in the outgoing parliament, took a strong stand against government policy and doubled its vote. By mainly attracting disaffected Labor voters they could wind up with the balance of power in the Senate. More interestingly, a popular independent member of the lower house of parliament, Peter Andren, took what many people saw as a great electoral risk in strongly criticising the government's post-Tampa policy.

He spent time explaining his attitude around the electorate, and rather than losing support, was returned to parliament with an extraordinary 15 per cent rise in his primary vote.

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