

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific countries or regions.

## Game of Clones

Playing the Race Card in the 2013 Australian Federal Election

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- The election campaign has been a »race to the bottom« to see who can most exploit the issue of asylum-seekers.
- There has been precious little to differentiate between the major parties, who have neglected numerous critical issues, such as mental illness, homelessness, the plight of Aboriginal people and discrimination against women.
- Both major parties' obsession with balancing the budget and being corporate-friendly comes at great social cost.
- Minor parties and Independents may achieve their highest proportion of the total vote for some time.





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## Introduction

On 4 August, Australian Labor Party (ALP) Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced a federal election date of 7 September. At the time of writing, the ALP was lurching towards likely defeat at the hands of the conservative Coalition (comprising the Liberal and National parties<sup>1</sup>) after almost three weeks of an election campaign shot through with racism and xenophobia. With the contest for government virtually preordained, interest turns to the fortunes of minor parties, such as the Greens and Julian Assange's Wikileaks Party.

## The Pre-Campaign Context

When Rudd deposed his rival Julia Gillard to win the leadership of the ALP and, therefore, the Prime Ministership<sup>2</sup> for the second time on 26 June, it was the *coup de grace* in a war of attrition waged by the backers of Rudd who, three years earlier almost to the day had been toppled by Gillard when his first term in office (2007–2010) ran aground on poor opinion polling and discontent within the party over his autocratic leadership style.

In this election, Rudd faces off against Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott, who shares much of his rival's free-market, pro-globalisation policy predilections. In the context of this shared vision, the campaign has been dominated by trivial squabbles and unseemly jousts over who could engineer the most draconian policies concerning the »boat-people« who have been arriving in Australia in greater numbers seeking asylum.<sup>3</sup>

## The Issues

### »Cost-of-Living Pressures«

The »national economy« is a social construct of little meaning to the increasing numbers of poor and homeless who have largely missed out on the economic boom in which Australian government and business leaders

have rejoiced over the past decade or so. In the second week of the campaign, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA), one of the country's »big four« banks, broke out the champagne to toast a whopping \$7.8 billion annual profit, while together the big four raked in profits of \$25.1 billion in the 2011–2012 financial year.<sup>4</sup> The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) admitted that more than 70 Australians who »earned« in excess of \$1 million in the 2010–2011 financial year had paid no income tax. The organisation WealthInsight predicted that by 2017 there would be 402,000 such millionaires in Australia, a 33 per cent jump on 2012. Moreover, the ATO more or less conceded that it could only look on helplessly as the likes of Google and Apple avoided paying tax. A Uniting Church<sup>5</sup> report in May found that 61 of the top 100 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange were stashing unknown sums of booty in tax havens in exotic destinations. While middle- and working-class incomes have tended barely to keep pace with inflation, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) remuneration has exploded off the chart: whereas in 1992 the CEOs of Australia's 51 largest companies enjoyed pay packets 20 times the average wage of full-time workers, this had risen to 63 times by 2005. The earnings of post-war bosses look positively Spartan compared to the mountains of cash on top of which their post-modern successors are perched!

In this context, »cost-of-living pressures« is a polite phrase crafted by politicians to sanitise plain, old-fashioned class inequality. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data released during the election, Australians are putting in record hours at the workplace. Alongside the recovery that the economy has enjoyed since the last major recession, in the early 1990s, poverty, inequality and homelessness have risen, as charities routinely report being unable to meet demand. The unemployment rate remained steady at 5.7 per cent in July only because a significant number of people quit looking for jobs. Moreover, the trends of casualisation and impermanency are on the increase in the Australian labour market, as temporary hire businesses have ballooned to become a \$15.6 billion industry. While what has come to be known as the »precariat« grapples with unstable

1. The amalgamated Liberal National Party (LNP) of Queensland is also part of this Coalition.

2. In Australia, the leader of the federal governing party or parties automatically becomes Prime Minister.

3. Over the course of 2012, a total of 17,202 people arrived by boat in Australia seeking asylum. By comparison, the next highest figures were 6,555 in 2010 and 5,516 in 2001.

4. The »big four« refers to the four largest banks in the Australian financial system: Commonwealth Bank of Australia, National Australia Bank, Westpac and ANZ (Australia and New Zealand Banking Group). Hereafter all \$ figures are in Australian currency.

5. Union of three churches: the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

forms of low-paid, short-term menial labour, the fallen ex-prime minister Julia Gillard retired from the fray to a luxury bungalow – purchased for a cool \$1.8 million, it came equipped with a swimming pool, 12-person spa bath, and a second outdoor kitchen and dining area – her own private Eden near the seaside in the South Australian capital, Adelaide, where she could kick back and ponder how it had all gone so wrong.

To the likes of Gillard, the interest rate cut of a quarter of a percentage point announced by the (officially independent) Reserve Bank of Australia in the first week of the campaign mattered little. It did provide some welcome relief to mortgagees as rates fell to their lowest level on record at 2.5 per cent, but it won't prick what some commentators regard as the biggest housing bubble in Australia since the 1880s, affecting Sydney in particular, where accommodation costs are among the highest in the world.

### Asylum-Seekers

Next to »cost-of-living pressures«, asylum-seekers weigh most on the minds of voters, according to research conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), the country's state-funded news service, in the so-called »bellwether« seat of Lindsay in Western Sydney. There is no doubt that Western Sydney, like many parts of Australia, is plagued by racism: the decade-long Challenging Racism Project overseen by Professor Kevin Dunn found that 61 per cent of people residing in the area harboured anti-Muslim feelings. But the fact that the two issues sat alongside each other suggests some connection between them: anxiety brought on by financial pressures and years of state neglect of the predominantly working class West Sydneysiders, help explain the susceptibility to political leaders' targeting of foreigners. The belief of some voters in this area that money spent on refugees should be devoted to needy Australians instead is intelligible only in this context. And yet, the approximately \$7 billion the Government has slated for building and maintaining detention centres offshore (see below) could be saved by processing asylum-seekers within the Australian community. More importantly, the ALP could have adopted a twofold strategy of developing a humanitarian policy on asylum-seekers and at the same time aiming to win working class voters away from the Coalition by offering redistributive economic policies. It

has done neither. Instead, it has guaranteed that it will lose the election and at the same time probably cede significant votes and members to the Greens.

While in the wider Australian electorate asylum-seekers do not top the list of things that rankle people, the issue predominated in the lead-up to the campaign proper. Along with its attacks on foreign – »457 visa« – workers, the Government has indulged in rampant xenophobia. This is reminiscent of the infamous 2001 »khaki« election in which then-Liberal Prime Minister John Howard successfully played the race card to keep the ALP out of power. Labor MP Anthony Albanese heckled a government backbencher with shouts of »Sieg Heil!«, so high were feelings running at the time. Fast forward 12 years and the Labor Government, in which Albanese is Deputy Prime Minister – how the tables have turned! – launched a \$30 million taxpayer-funded campaign in daily newspapers carrying full-page advertisements blaring the message, »If You Come Here by Boat Without a Visa, You Won't Be Settled in Australia«. The warnings were accompanied with images of asylum-seekers weeping after learning of their fate.

The government propaganda campaign was accompanied by an unprecedented deal with the Papua New Guinea government that would see all asylum-seeker men, women and children who arrive by boat – those who arrive by aircraft historically have come in greater numbers and are treated more charitably – processed in Papua New Guinea, a dreadfully poor island nation to Australia's north with a UN Human Development Indicator (HDI) of just 0.446, and in which some 70 per cent of women are raped or physically assaulted at some time in their lives. As part of the deal, currently subject to legal challenge, the government further decreed that any asylum-seeker dispatched to Papua New Guinea would never set foot on Australian soil.

Among other things, this smacked of colonialism: to many Papua New Guinea locals, who hit the streets in protest, this was a case of a rich country foisting its problems on a poor neighbour, a suspicion lent greater credence by Papua New Guinea's historical relationship with Australia, which administered the country until 1975. As this report was being finalised, discomfiting murmurings were emanating from the Papua New Guinea Government suggesting that not all refugees sent their way

would stay and that some would be returned to the »lucky country«.<sup>6</sup>

The Labor Government, like the Howard Government before it, extended the discourtesies to Nauru, a tiny South Pacific island nation to Australia's north-east, to allow some asylum-seekers to »settle and reside« there without any possibility of being granted citizenship. Asylum-seekers rebelled in Nauru recently, setting their detention camp ablaze after what the Salvation Army called a »build up of pressure and anxiety over 10 months of degrading treatment«.

None of this deterred the Coalition, which has also staked its reputation on »stopping the boats«. As well as wishing to literally tow boats back whence they came, it plans to expand detention of asylum-seekers in a »tent city« on Nauru and to put control of its policy in the hands of a three-star army general charged with responding to this »national emergency«. It has tried to outdo the Labor Government in mean-spiritedness by pledging income-management controls of asylum-seekers and offering only temporary protection visas that granted no prospect of permanent resettlement – a policy originally championed by the racist politician Pauline Hanson (see below) and described by one former refugee as »the cruellest thing you can do to a person« – and no chance of reunion with family members. Asylum-seekers would be stripped of their right to appeal against unfavourable refugee judgments (although this is likely to prove unconstitutional). Liberal frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull, in a fit of candour, admitted that his party's policy was »harsh – cruel, in fact«, but claimed it was the »least cruel« option.

None of this is to say that Australia is exceptional – though it may be in relation to the spectacle of a whole election being fought around the question – in a world in which refugees and immigrants – numbering up to 15 million, according to some estimates – are routinely exploited, despite the arbitrary nature of borders and their very recent policing: prior to the First World War, movement of people was relatively unregulated and even now under the terms of the 1973 Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, Australians and New Zealanders can move unimpeded between each of their countries to visit, live and work as they please.

6. A traditional epithet for Australia.

The depths of mean-spiritedness and inhumanity to which this election has plummeted clash heavily with Australia's cultivated image as a »land of opportunity«, the place of a »fair go« for all. As a country with vast tracts of vacant and sparsely populated space, Australia does not absorb its fair share (less than 0.2 per cent) of the world refugee population: the world's twelfth biggest economy ranks seventy-first by refugee intake. Australia is obliged to help asylum-seekers on account of its contribution to the refugee problem through participation in wars in Afghanistan – accounting for up to a quarter of the world's refugee population – and Iraq. But the message to the contrary from politicians has certainly been getting through to voters: in the past year alone, there has been a spate of racist attacks on public transport, which are often filmed by passengers and later uploaded to YouTube, including one in which a Sydney woman abused four bystanders on a bus. One of those unfortunate to be on the receiving end of her spray was told to »go back on your f...king boat«.

For the veteran journalist Phillip Adams all this brought to mind the legacy of the »White Australia« policy, which effectively denied entry to non-white Europeans from the time of federation in 1901 up till the late 1960s: »Our refugee policies ... are aimed at brown people. They are aimed at Muslims. The whole thing is conducted in code and euphemism, but that's the truth of it.« Indeed, the policies harked back to long-standing racial cleavages in Australia reflected not just in the long-standing discrimination against the Indigenous people but also recurring racial conflagrations, such as the late-nineteenth-century riots against Chinese gold miners in Victoria and New South Wales, and more recently the anti-Muslim riots in Sydney's southern suburb of Cronulla in 2005.

Whatever their roots, the policies were designed ostensibly to prevent people from setting out on a dangerous voyage across from Indonesia, where many asylum-seekers arrive en route from various locations, including the Middle East and South Asia, except that the Government was not offering to process them in Indonesia instead. The other target of the policy, the so-called »people smugglers« who ferried the hopefuls across rough seas, became Public Enemy No.1, despite the role they have historically played in assisting asylum-seekers to reach their destinations. Labor MP Roger Price back in 2001 had contextualised the seriousness of the crime of »people-smuggling« by pointing out that, had his Jewish

grandparents not been able to pay people to evacuate Austria, they may well have perished in a Nazi concentration camp.

## The Economy and State Finances

Despite the warm rays of sunshine in which the national economy has been basking over the past decade, Australia's cloudy economic landscape – whose backdrop, of course, is global financial destruction – thoroughly permeates election discourse. Spokespersons of both major parties are likely to rue years of relying heavily on China's purchasing of Australian minerals: her economy is slowing and the mining boom in Australia may already have peaked. The results of the National Australia Bank's (NAB) monthly business survey, released in early August, revealed that business confidence had plumbed an eight-month low, while conditions in manufacturing, construction, mining, retail and wholesale were described as »very poor«. A report by the independent Australian think tank the Grattan Institute warned of the risk of recession after the mining boom.

Raining further on the Government's parade was the Department of the Treasury, which predicted that the federal budget would be characterised by more than \$60 billion in deficits over the next three years. This was partly a product of successive tax cuts for business and higher-income earners, particularly over the past 15 years, and of the failure of the Government's mining tax – a 30 per cent tax imposed on the »super profits« made from iron ore and coal mining introduced in July 2012 – to yield the revenues originally forecast. And yet, in this context the Coalition was promising to blow a bigger hole in the state's capacity to raise revenue by pledging a cut in the corporate tax rate from 30 per cent to 28.5 per cent, at a cost of \$2.5 billion per year. Although the Coalition promised to render the change revenue-neutral by slashing spending elsewhere – details are lacking, since the Coalition is expected to release the financial costing of policies only days before the election – the point is that the corporate tax rate has fallen steadily since the mid-1980s, when it peaked at 49 per cent. A few modest increases in the opposite direction would surely nullify the deficit. At the same time, more than \$25 billion annually will continue to be poured into a defence force that has never been called on to defend the Australian mainland.

The Government has rightly pointed to the dire state of treasuries around the world: in 2012 Australia's budget deficit was 2.95 per cent of GDP compared to 4.14 per cent for the European Union and 5.91 per cent for the major capitalist economies. But both the Government and the Opposition have committed themselves to returning the budget to surplus – whatever the social cost – with differences confined to the details of where, when and how much to cut.

## Health and Education

Neither party is proposing anything substantial enough to deal with the crisis in Australia's underfunded public health system, which recently forced a 100-year-old man to wait two days to be transferred from the emergency department to a proper ward at Western Sydney's Blacktown hospital. One Sydney emergency room nurse could not »ever remember being as stressed out and worried as I am now«. The long-standing problem built in to the Australian federal system of government, which divides responsibilities for health between State and Federal administrations, produces an ongoing blame-game. But both major parties have also undermined the public health system by promoting private health insurance.

On education, the Labor Government has promised the so-called Gonski reforms (named after businessman David Gonski, who chaired the review panel recommending the reforms) – now backed by the Opposition – which would see increases in funding to schools of some \$15 billion over the next six years, but would also continue the enormous government monies lavished on elite private institutions. Indeed, the government was delivering less than half the \$39 billion recommended by Gonski and to pay for the higher school spending a large reduction in university funding was announced to the tune of \$2.3 billion. In response, university students walked out of classes in protest, while the higher education trade union (NTEU) elected to support the Greens, who oppose the cuts, in the Upper House and in selected Lower House seats (see below).

## Industrial Relations

The Coalition played down its proposals for change in industrial relations after losing the 2007 Federal Election





in large part due to its highly unpopular and extremely pro-business »Work Choices« legislation. Nevertheless, many in the unions expect an assault on organised labour in the event of a return of the conservatives, who have pledged to reintroduce the anti-construction worker union Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), who were granted »police-state powers«, according to union historian Humphrey McQueen, to target unions taking unlawful strike action rather than bosses jeopardising the safety of workers.

On the other hand, the differences between the major parties are slight and since coming to power in 2007 the ALP has made only modest alterations to »Work Choices«, leading the Greens to deride its policy as »Work Choices lite«. Even the trade unions, who founded the ALP back in 1891, have been wary of donating to the cause this time round. This is part of a more general estrangement, evident in numerous other countries – including Germany – between social democratic parties and their union allies, which in Australia’s case has seen support switched on occasion to the Greens and Independents.

Indeed, it was a striking fact that, on an issue that should have been dear to unions’ hearts – state-funded parental leave – the conservative Coalition was promising a more generous scheme than the one implemented by Labor in 2011. Whereas the latter introduced paid leave for 18 weeks at the national minimum wage of \$622 per week, the Coalition has pledged 26 weeks of paid leave at a maximum annual rate of \$150,000, a \$5.5 billion policy to be funded by a special tax on big businesses – offset by the company tax cut (see above) – and probably economies elsewhere.

### The Environment

Rudd once dubbed climate change »the great moral challenge of our generation«. After taking power in 2007, his government ratified the Kyoto Protocol following its climate sceptic predecessor’s refusal to do so. But neither major party plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions at a rate anything like what is needed internationally to reduce the threat of colossal global warming impacts. Even if the Government holds on at the election, and even if it implements its market-based Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS, which in 2015–2016 would replace a floating carbon price), there will be at most a 5 per cent

cut in greenhouse gas emissions on 2000 levels by 2020. Meanwhile, the Coalition, while officially committed to the same target, is promising to scrap what it calls the »carbon tax« and to implement instead »direct action«, including planting trees, storing carbon in soil, installing rooftop solar panels and paying business to improve energy efficiency – policies the Climate Institute research organisation predicts will not avert *increases* in emissions on 2000 levels by 2020.

### Same-Sex Marriage

In the first televised debate between the two major party leaders, Rudd – a suspiciously late convert to the cause – announced that within 100 days of being re-elected he would bring a bill to parliament to legalise same-sex marriage, on which ALP parliamentarians would be afforded a free vote. Opposition Leader Abbott, on the other hand, although his sister is a lesbian and despite calls within his own party for change, maintained his personal opposition to same-sex marriage, declaring the matter would be decided by »a future party room«.

## Missing in Action: The Issues That Barely Saw the Light of Day

### Aboriginal Australians

Perhaps most conspicuous by their absence from the campaign have been Indigenous Australians, who suffer life expectancy rates some 17 years shorter than non-Indigenous Australians. Both the Government and the Opposition are committed to reducing the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but neither has put forward policies likely to make a meaningful difference. Indeed, some of their policies are likely to further entrench the gap in living standards, including those embodied in the Northern Territory (NT) Intervention,<sup>7</sup> which began in 2007.

7. The 2007 Northern Territory (NT) Board of Inquiry report »Little Children are Sacred«, on the subject of sexual abuse of children in NT Aboriginal communities, was the pretext for the Australian federal Government’s armed invasion of these communities and unprecedented far-reaching and racist policies enacted thereafter in the run-up to that year’s federal election. In fact, the seductive rhetoric of protecting children was deployed to mask the sinister ambition of wiping out culturally distinctive ways of living by Aboriginal people in these communities (see Altman, J. and Hinkson, M. (eds), 2008, *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, North Carlton: Arena).

## Women's Issues

These were also crying out for attention, despite long-standing structural inequalities, including the chasm between men and women's pay, which typically fluctuates between 15 and 17 per cent; shockingly high rates of domestic violence that see up to 34 per cent of women suffer abuse from a partner or ex-partner at one time or other; and the continued sexual objectification of women's bodies.

## Mental Health

Depression continues to grow alarmingly, with potential consequences for crime, drug and alcohol abuse and violence. What the World Health Organization (WHO) calls a »social and economic timebomb« is likely to explode in Australia if current trends are any indication. Over a quarter of young people experience mental health problems in any given year. Meanwhile, retired army Major-General John Cantwell has predicted a »tidal wave« of mental health problems afflicting troops returning from battle in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Homelessness

Barely a word has been said about the homeless of Australia, who number some 105,000. National census figures (statistics collected by the government every five years) show that homelessness increased by 8 per cent between 2006 and 2011.

## The Party-Political (disg)Race

The Coalition parties currently hold 73 seats<sup>8</sup> in the 150-seat House of Representatives (Lower House), thus requiring a net gain of only three seats to attain the target of 76 for majority government. The ALP currently holds 72<sup>9</sup> – ruling with the support of one Green MP and In-

dependents – and therefore requires one seat more than the Coalition for majority government.

The ALP enjoyed a sharp growth spurt in opinion polls after Gillard's exit stage left. But this was short-lived (the most recent polling suggests that Rudd may be in danger of losing his own seat of Griffith in Queensland) for at the time of writing it was likely that the Coalition would easily win more than 76 seats, especially since it is favoured to win in the two New South Wales (NSW) seats, New England and Lyne, up for grabs after the retirements of, respectively, Independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott (ex-National). Also, the Coalition is expected to triumph in the Queensland north coast seat of Fisher, whose incumbent Peter Slipper, a former Liberal turned Independent, has been mired in fraud and sexual harassment scandals.

Probably, victory will be secured in the most populous State of New South Wales – accounting for 48 of the 150 seats in the Lower House – especially in the seats in the western suburbs of the State's capital, Sydney, a number of which are traditional ALP »heartlands« that have been transformed into swing seats. The latter is part of the worldwide trend of social democrats drifting ever further away from the working class constituents who once made and supported them. As political parties have converged on a neo-liberal policy framework – due in part to deteriorating economic conditions in the advanced capitalist economies since the early 1970s – ideological boundaries have blurred, contributing to the volatility of elections and the propensity of voters to swing between major parties, minor parties and Independents. Ideological differences have diminished and so personality (or lack thereof!), »style« and spin have come to the fore, further turning off the mass of the population. Indeed, the paradox of growing lack of interest in official politics and heightened interest in the politics of the street – as evidenced in the rise of the »anti-globalisation« movement and Occupy Wall Street, and in the strikes, protests and marches that have become a regular feature of European life – is not yet as apparent in Australia, but it is nonetheless discernible.

Far, far away from the global vistas opened up by the likes of Occupy, the election result may well be deter-

8. This figure includes the retiring National Tony Crook, the sitting MP in the West Australian seat of O'Connor (previously Liberal-held for 30 years), who initially sat on the crossbenches before joining the Opposition. Crook's retirement paves the way for the Liberal Party's Rick Wilson to win the seat.

9. This figures includes the seat of Dobell, NSW, held by Craig Thomson, who was expelled from the ALP during this term of parliament over issues of alleged fraudulent misuse of credit cards while he was a union official.

Though no longer in the ALP, he usually supports the Government, which might hold his seat at the election.

mined in the southern rural NSW district of Eden-Monaro (held by the ALP with a margin of 4.2 per cent): held by the winning party at every election since 1972, this is a »bellwether« seat, although here the incumbent Labor MP Colonel Mike Kelly is given a fighting chance after winning in 2007 and increasing his majority in 2010. Other important marginal seats (held by a margin of between 3 and 6 per cent) in New South Wales for the government include Dobell, Parramatta and Page.

In addition, a number of marginal seats in the third largest State, Queensland, will also be critical, including Flynn (Coalition-held) and Capricornia (ALP-held). But there are also some very marginal seats (held by a margin of less than 3 per cent) in Queensland, including (by the Coalition) Dawson and Herbert, and there are similar seats perilously held in the second most populous State, Victoria. There the ALP holds the seats of Corangamite and Deakin by just a few hundred votes (Corangamite has more than 100,000 voters in its electorate), and history does not favour the Government: the ALP won in Corangamite in 2007 for the first time since 1929, while in Deakin Labor's Mike Symon is only the second ALP member ever to hold the seat. Other very marginal seats to watch include, on the Coalition side, Hasluck in the State of Western Australia, Boothby in South Australia, Aston and Dunkley in Victoria, Solomon in the Northern Territory, and Brisbane, Forde, Longman, Herbert, Dawson, and Bonner in Queensland. Included among the very marginal seats held by the ALP are Greenway, Robertson, Banks, Lindsay and Reid in New South Wales, Deakin and La Trobe in Victoria, and Moreton and Petrie in Queensland.

What makes the Coalition's victory seem assured is that in broader national terms at the time of writing it was polling consistently higher both on the two-party-preferred vote (the vote split between the two major parties after preferences – the Coalition typically winning 51–52 per cent, compared to the ALP's 48–49 per cent) and on the primary vote (voters' first preference, on which Labor was scoring as low as 34 per cent and the Coalition as high as the mid-to-high 40s). The Coalition's unpopular leader Tony Abbott was consistently polling worse than Rudd on the preferred Prime Minister rating until the end of the second week of the campaign, when he overtook Rudd in polls taken in four Sydney seats. (In broader national polls, Rudd has maintained his lead as preferred Prime Minister, though only by a slim margin of 44 per cent

compared to 40 per cent for Abbott as of 26 August). Also, Abbott has got the better of Rudd on the question of trustworthiness, with one poll at the end of the second week of the campaign recording a figure of 47 per cent for the Opposition leader compared to 40 per cent for the Prime Minister (both less than majorities!). More importantly, surveys have consistently shown that voters expect to see an Abbott Government formed after 7 September, a measure that has correctly forecast every election since 2001.

The general unpopularity of the Government has allowed the Coalition to get off scot-free with a strategy of keeping its own policy cards close to its chest and focussing instead on launching attacks on the Government. The reasons for Labor's miserable state are numerous, varied and inter-related. Its woes are characteristic of the modern social democratic malaise to which numerous studies have devoted attention, including the present author's *The Death of Social Democracy* (2008), a tale of ideological disorientation, capitulation to global capitalism, parties oozing members and supporters, and the vanishing of any pretence to believing in anything more than winning the next election. Rudd assumed power as a self-confessed »fiscal conservative« and as someone who endorsed much of his predecessor's legacy, before presiding over the administration of programmes riven with corruption and bureaucratic flaws, including mass roofing insulations that resulted in the deaths of three men, all under 25 years of age.

The ALP came to power in 2007 at the beginning of an international economic downturn, whose effects in Australia were barely ameliorated by the economic stimulus measures introduced by the government: average net worth of households fell by more than \$30,000 between 2009–2010 and 2011–2012. After being re-elected in 2010 it reneged on its promise not to introduce a carbon tax, whose cost was destined to be borne by those least able to afford it. Furthermore, it has failed to ease the stresses and strains on working class people – refusing, for example, to raise unemployment benefit payments and making only modest changes to »Work Choices« – and in numerous cases it has added to them, as in the cut in payments to single parents and increases in tobacco and alcohol taxes. It has also been hurt by damning findings at the beginning of August arising from an official inquiry in relation to corruption in the NSW Labor Government, which was dramatically ousted in 2011. More

broadly, it has failed to turn back from the neo-liberal direction it pursued in government in the 1980s and 1990s, and which saw it so roundly defeated at the 1996 Federal election. To round off its existential crisis, it has been beset by a toxic organisational culture reflected in positively Shakespearean betrayals at the very top of the party.

If the uphill battle were not steep enough, the ALP has also had to contend with some ruthlessly hostile coverage from the press, including the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Limited media company, whose Sydney-based *Daily Telegraph* (the equivalent of Germany's *Bild*) on the first full day of the campaign implored readers to »Kick This Mob Out«! Rudd attributed the malevolence of Murdoch to the Government's National Broadband Network (NBN) policy – a \$44.1 billion internet infrastructure programme – and the threat it posed to his Foxtel business operations. Disputing this were some media analysts influenced by scholar David McKnight's 2012 book, *Rupert Murdoch: An Investigation of Political Power*, which portrayed Murdoch simply as a ruthless political player who revels in using his power to determine election results.

In the context of such mass media opposition, the ALP's internet campaigns took on greater importance, indicated by the recruitment by Rudd – who at the time of writing had some 1.3 million followers on Twitter compared to Abbott's derisory 152,000 – of Obama strategists and social media gurus Tom McMahon, Joon Kim and Matthew McGregor. This served only to enhance the banality of the campaign, as the Prime Minister uploaded a »selfie« photograph of himself on Instagram displaying cuts to his face suffered while shaving. None of this helped to counter the perception – revealed in a study by the independent Australian think tank Australia Institute – among many young people that they were being condescended to and that issues important to them, such as jobs, university funding and accommodation costs, were largely being neglected.

At the risk of further alienating young people, the Liberals announced in the second week of the campaign that they would put the Greens – who perform strongly among young people – below Labor in their preferences on voters' ballot papers, reversing the 2010 policy of placing the Greens before its main rival for office. While the decision was ostensibly aimed at avoiding another

hung parliament, it no doubt owed more to the fact that Labor politicians are much less repugnant to a pious Catholic conservative such as Abbott than are the socially liberal (and in some cases socialist) Greens (see below). In a sense, this seemed redolent of the claims of »cartel party« theorists Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair of collaboration on the part of major parties to snuff out new competitors. On the other hand, the ALP, while almost equally vehement in denouncing the »extremist« Greens, are preferencing the latter in the Senate in all States except Queensland (see below).

Regardless of their nominal power, however, the feet of Australia's major parties are made of clay: over a period of decades Australians have grown sick of the sight of politicians and political parties, illustrated in the success of right-wing mavericks such as Pauline Hanson, Independents and the left-wing Greens. Major-party membership has collapsed: the ALP, for example, could call on a veritable army of some 300,000 members around the time of the Second World War, compared to a contemporary figure of roughly 30,000, a figure which in any case flatters the party given that only a small fraction of them are active. Surveys have shown growing numbers of voters unable to see much difference between the parties. This is consistent with international evidence of widespread distrust, disengagement and disaffection among electorates. An electoral system heavily weighted in their favour is one of the few things saving the major parties. The fear and loathing towards politicians was summed up by one Queensland voter during this campaign: »They are all pretty much all the same, except they get big pay rises and we don't«.

In this context, the Greens have emerged as the principal fly in the major parties' ointment. Former leader Bob Brown expects they will achieve their best result ever on the back of the anti-asylum seeker bidding war. The Greens' national vote has been rising steadily – from approximately 200,000 votes (2.2 per cent) in 1998 to 1.5 million votes (11.8 per cent) in 2010 – but it shot to prominence at the 2001 election when it spoke up for asylum-seekers during the »khaki election« (see above). The ABC's *7.30 Report* current affairs programme revealed that some ALP supporters, disgusted by their government's stance, were prepared to vote Green over the issue. Indeed, one Labor Party member was seen in footage on a nightly news bulletin setting his membership card alight at a public demonstration against the PNG

stitch-up. This follows reports of some ALP members defecting to the Greens after 30 years' membership, politicians jumping ship for Green pastures and retired Labor ministers switching their vote to the minor party. The Greens have tried to fill the social-democratic void left by the ALP's embrace of neo-liberalism by pitching itself as part of »a new worldwide political force combating economic rationalism and corporate globalisation«. Labor Senator Kate Lundy conceded the capacity of the Greens' progressive ideology to »attract and inspire young people in droves and there's actually not a lot we can do about it«. Between roughly two-thirds and three-quarters of the party's voters are former Labor partisans. However, it is important to understand that in some ways they are closer to Germany's *Die Linke* than to its Greens.

The Australian Greens confront numerous challenges, including questions over whether they are against the planet-devouring capitalist system or just against neo-liberalism – ideological questions complicated by conflicting positions held by party figures over the years – how to juggle the politics of bureaucracy and the politics of the street, and how to avoid the politically damaging compromises bound up with parliamentary strategies for social change and which go some way towards explaining the ALP's predicament. Indeed, just in this election they have entered into a devil's pact in some States with mining boss Clive Palmer (see below) in an effort to stave off the defeat of South Australian Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young. A deeper problem is how to reach out more effectively with their economically redistributive policies – more progressive than those of the ALP – to the disaffected working class voters who might be drawn by the race card of the major parties. Thus far in this campaign their economic and industrial policies have been far overshadowed by environmental and racial questions.

These challenges aside, there is no doubt that they are trying to tap into a rich vein of discontent with established politics, particularly (though not exclusively) on the left. How well they will succeed in this endeavour come 7 September is not clear. Despite reports of pessimism in the party's ranks, some analysts have suggested that the Greens might consolidate their support in the Upper House, where they currently have nine – out of 76 – Senators and where a congenial Proportional Representation system is in operation. According to commentator Gerard Henderson, combining the latter with a compulsory preferential voting system along with, in the

case of the NSW Senate, the choice of 110 candidates mean that many voters will choose to vote »above the line« (rather than »below the line«, whereby the voter tediously nominates their preferences from 1 to 110), thereby accepting the preference distributions the parties have predetermined. Given the ALP's preferencing of the Greens in the Senate, this means that the preferences of any Labor voter in the Upper House in every State (except Queensland) will be distributed to the Greens if they vote above the line.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the House of Representatives in their only seat in Melbourne, an ALP stronghold from 1904 to 2010, Green MP Adam Bandt goes into this election without the preference votes of the Liberals he enjoyed last time. But there is a possibility that he might retain the seat – requiring a 4.2 per cent boost in support – given that not all Coalition voters are expected to follow their party's official preference policy, and given Labor's fall in support since 2010.

A notable new entrant on the left has been Julian Assange's Wikileaks Party, which outraged the Greens (long-standing supporters of the transparency activists) when it preferenced some far right forces ahead of it in New South Wales and Western Australia, where Greens Senator Scott Ludlam risks losing his spot as a result, potentially enabling Abbott to seize control of the Upper House. Wikileaks put this decision down to an »administrative error«, a costly one that reportedly sparked numerous membership resignations and the confirmed withdrawal of one of its candidates. Surely the Party's best chance lies with Assange himself, who is running in the Victorian Senate despite being holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy in London (should he win, a fellow party member would have to take his place in the Senate). But this will be a hotly contested field, with just 12 positions available.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a rogue's gallery of right-wing minor and micro-parties – none of which is, as yet, comparable in size or threat to the European far right parties that have broken through in numerous places – including the anti-Islamic Rise Up Australia Party, whose policies included banning »the face veil« and limiting the availability of Halal products. The Liberals will preference Rise Up ahead of Labor and the Greens in voting for Victorian Senate seats, and because Rise Up's founder will appear first on the ballot paper in that

State by virtue of a lucky draw, it claims to be hopeful of winning two Senate seats.<sup>10</sup>

In overlapping political territory is former National and Independent Bob Katter's Australian Party (KAP), a right-wing populist and economically protectionist formation. KAP is seeking to expand on their founder's presence in the Federal Parliament after securing two seats and 11.5 per cent of the vote in the Queensland State Election in 2012. By its own reckoning the party's best chance lies with a Senate spot contested by celebrity candidate James Blundell in Katter's home State of Queensland, where it has negotiated a preference swap with the ALP.

Also notable on the Right is the notorious anti-immigrant politician Pauline Hanson, who was disendorsed by the Liberal Party in 1996 for racist utterances. She is standing as a Senate candidate in New South Wales. Her party, One Nation, whose popularity peaked at 9 per cent of the vote in the 1998 Federal election, had to cut loose one of its female candidates after she embarrassed herself in a television interview by claiming that Islam was a country, that Haram was the holy text of Islam and that Jews were followers of Jesus Christ! It has been suggested, however, that Hanson could win representation in the NSW Senate with the help of right-wing party preferences.

Of passing interest will be the performance of the Palmer United Party (PUP), the creation of the unhinged mining boss given to fantastic conspiracy theories, Clive Palmer, a former life member of the Liberal National Party in Queensland who has emulated Silvio Berlusconi's act of self-realisation in inventing Forza Italia in the mid-1990s. Apart from being pro-mining, anti-carbon tax (consistent with Palmer's mining interests) and opposed to the »class war« in Australia, it is notable that the PUP wants refugees to have »opportunities for a better future and lifestyle« (which allowed the Greens to varnish its preference arrangement with Palmer). Interestingly, it also claims to be the only party standing candidates in every Lower House seat and Senate team in all States and Territories – testament to the war-chest at Palmer's disposal.

## Conclusion

The Coalition looks, as the days go by, increasingly certain of a comfortable victory on 7 September. But, owing to the conduct of both parties in cynically exploiting some of the world's most desperate people for short-term electoral benefit, there is likely to be no small amount of soul-searching and not a few heads hung in shame when the dust settles. In this sense, the real interest in this election is on the left, where it remains to be seen whether the Greens can further erode the support of the major parties, and whether the Wikileaks Party can capitalise on its founder's international following. On the right, meanwhile, Rise Up Australia, the Palmer United Party and Katter's Australian Party are all jostling for what could be the highest vote for minor parties in years.

10. The positions of candidates on the ballot papers for both the Lower and Upper Houses are decided by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), who blindly draws from a container numbered balls each of which is aligned with a party or candidate, whose place on the ballot paper is determined by the order in which they are drawn.





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