

# **The Australian Labor Party and its Various Constituencies**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper discusses whether and how the Australian Labor Party (ALP) can balance the arguably conflicting interests and outlooks of its blue-collar 'heartland' and the socially progressive, middle-class, professional elements of its constituency. The paper includes analysis, in socio-geographical detail and in historical perspective, of the results of the November 2001 national Australian election as well as opinion poll trends and academic survey results and interpretations before and since that time. Debate intensified after Labor's 2001 election defeat about the supposedly irreconcilable character of different Labor Party constituencies. Much of this debate however was (and remains) characterised by derogatory and judgemental categorisations of various ill-defined social groups. On the eve of the 2004 national Australian election, based on careful consideration of a range of demographic and electoral evidence, this paper contends that, while there are, at times, conflicting interests and outlooks between different elements of the ALP's constituency (just as there is amid the support base of many social democratic parties in western nations), the party's electoral future will be best served by standing on and extending as far as possible the considerable common ground between these various elements. This common ground, it is argued, consists of egalitarian economic policies which promote security in people's lives and which thus build scope for the pursuit and acceptance of more compassionate, outward looking social policies. Its consolidation requires leadership by the Party in shaping public opinion rather than mere reaction to what is assumed to be static public opinion.*

There has been much discussion since Labor went into Opposition nationally in 1996 about the breaking up of the post-Whitlam social coalition of ALP support. Gough Whitlam is known for his legacy of strengthening the ALP's support beyond blue-collar workers as a result of his reforms to the Party and reorientation of its policies from the late 1960s, without a corresponding loss of support for Labor from blue-collar workers. A disproportionate loss of blue-collar support became a serious problem for the ALP after some years of the subsequent period in which the Party was in government, from 1983 to 1996, under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Whereas Whitlam pursued a social democratic, expansionary and redistributive role for the State, the Hawke and Keating governments ardently pursued neo-liberal economic policies which many saw as betraying Labor Party traditions.

Table 1 below, which is sourced (as indicated) from published data from the Australian Election Study (AES) and from some recognised preceding surveys, reminds us both of the extent of the rise in white-collar support for the ALP after 1967 (the year Whitlam became ALP Leader), and the extent of the fall in the ALP's blue-collar support from 1984 to 1996.

**Table 1: ALP support from blue-collar and white-collar workers**

YEAR	% of blue-collar workers support for ALP	% of white-collar workers support for ALP
1961 <sup>1</sup>	64	35
1967 <sup>2</sup>	58	25
1979 <sup>3</sup>	63	41
1984 <sup>4</sup>	65	46
1987 <sup>5</sup>	59	40
1990 <sup>6</sup>	50	38
1993 <sup>7</sup>	59	38
1996 <sup>8</sup>	44	36
1998 <sup>9</sup>	46	36
2001 <sup>10</sup>	47	30

<sup>1</sup> R.R. Alford, *Party and Society: The Anglo-American Democracies*, Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut, 1973 (first published 1963), Table B2, pp 350-351 (Australian Public Opinion Polls data on federal voting intention for the year 1961).

<sup>2</sup> D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, second edition 1982, Table 8.9, p 130 (survey data on party identification for the year 1967).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, Table 21.3, p 319 (survey data on party identification of those with some party identification for the year 1979).

<sup>4</sup> I. McAllister and A. Ascui, 'Voting Patterns', Table 9.4, p 230 in I. McAllister and J. Warhurst (eds.), *Australia Votes: The 1987 Federal Election*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988, Table 9.4, p 230 (AES data on recalled vote from the 1984 election).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, (AES data on 1987 election vote).

<sup>6</sup> I. McAllister, *Political Behaviour: Citizens, Parties and Elites in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992, Figure 7.3, p 159 (AES data on 1990 election vote).

<sup>7</sup> C. Bean, 'Who Now Votes Labor?', in J. Warhurst and A. Parkin (eds), *The Machine: Labor Confronts the Future*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, Table 4.1, p 76 (AES data on 1993 election vote).

<sup>8</sup> I. McAllister and C. Bean, 'Long-term Electoral Trends and the 1996 Election', in C. Bean, M. Simms, S. Bennett and J. Warhurst (eds), *The Politics of Retribution: The 1996 Federal Election*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p 244, note 5 (AES data on 1996 election vote).

<sup>9</sup> C. Bean and I. McAllister, 'Voting Behaviour', in M. Simms and J. Warhurst (eds), *Howard's Agenda: The 1998 Australian Election*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2000, Table 22.3, p 179 (AES data on 1998 election vote).

<sup>10</sup> C. Bean and I. McAllister, 'From Impossibility to Certainty: Explaining the Coalition's Victory in 2001', in J. Warhurst and M. Simms (eds), *2001: The Centenary Election*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002, Table 27.4, p 276 (AES data on 2001 election vote).

The label 'blue-collar' is, of course, not necessarily a, and is certainly not the only, designator of social disadvantage. The distinction between 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' (or 'manual' and 'non-manual') workers is inherently artificial, and there are certainly now and have long been very many routine white-collar workers who are themselves employed in low-paid, casual jobs and who in their incomes and prospects are much closer to many blue-collar workers than they are to the 'career' sections of the labour force. A distinction between 'jobs' and 'careers' tells us more than that between blue and white-collar workers.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it is not possible to make comparisons between the occupational bases of support for the ALP over a period of 40 years as in the above Table unless we use the broad distinction between 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' workers, due to limitations of the earlier data. Further, the political outlook of 'blue-collar' workers still does tend to be a reliable indicator of the political outlook of the working class defined more broadly to include routine 'white-collar' workers.<sup>12</sup>

The drop in support for Labor from nearly two thirds to well below half of blue-collar workers between 1984 and 1996 contributed to the downward trend of the ALP's overall primary vote in that period. As Table 1 shows, blue-collar support for the ALP fell steeply in the 1987 and especially the 1990 national elections (although the ALP retained government in 1990 through the flow of second preference votes). The ALP managed - with a partial retreat from neo-liberal economic policies and with the conservative Coalition parties' adoption of even more extreme neo-liberal economic policies - to contain and reverse the drop in primary vote support at the 1993 election. After this, however, the re-elected Labor government breached election promises by reverting to some unpopular tax measures, and the Coalition opposition finally presented a safe, moderate and unified alternative. Labor then felt the full fury of the accumulated anger of 'the battlers' at the 1996 national election. The current Australian Prime Minister John Howard came into office expressing a desire for Australia to be "comfortable and relaxed" - a conservative message which struck a chord among voters feeling the effects of years of economic insecurity.

Another interpretation of the reasons for the ALP's 1996 election defeat was that the Party had alienated blue-collar voters because it became captured by middle-class, 'politically correct' special interest groups. Labor's defeat in this view occurred because it had supported causes such as multiculturalism and Aboriginal land rights.

Leading political scientist Judith Brett provided the most plausible synthesis of these different interpretations, and pointed the way to an appropriate response by Labor, when she wrote (in October 1996), that, although in the 1980s and early to mid 1990s:

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<sup>11</sup> See J. Westergaard, *Who Gets What? The Hardening of Class Inequality in the Late Twentieth Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp 155-156.

<sup>12</sup> See discussion in *ibid.*, pp 172-174.

Labor did not convince blue-collar Australia of its cultural agenda of multiculturalism and racial tolerance...it has not convinced them of its economic agenda of deregulation, internationalisation and privatisation, either. What they see is declining income, rising unemployment and an increasingly uncertain economic future. This provides an opening for Labor to start to rebuild its support among working-class Australians without having to concede any cultural ground at all. Economic policies clearly distinguished from Mr. Howard's in giving a positive role to government in building industry and providing employment would quickly win back much of the support it lost.<sup>13</sup>

Brett has more recently integrated this analysis into her wider historical study of the Liberal Party, arguing that Australian Labor's steady departure from being the party of the workers in its period of market liberal economic government from 1983 to 1996 opened the way for the new Liberal prime minister John Howard to rhetorically construct a constituency of 'Howard's battlers', to appropriate the symbol of work previously monopolised by Labor, and to thereby win support from blue-collar workers who had previously been loyal Labor voters, but by 1996 perceived no economic reason to continue to favour Labor over non-Labor.<sup>14</sup>

After its defeat in 1996 the ALP elected Kim Beazley unopposed as its new Leader - and for a time he seemed to have taken Judith Brett's advice. In the first phase of Beazley's Leadership (1996-98) the ALP's emphasis was on rebuilding lost support, and Labor moved away somewhat from the Hawke/Keating economic policy approach. Labor declared full employment as the highest objective of economic policy: something it had refused to do in government. It supported greater public investment in health and education. It returned to a more regulatory policy approach to the labour market including a strong commitment to centralised wage-fixing in response to workers' backlash against the excessive working hours and insecurity, which Labor's policy in government of 'enterprise bargaining' had brought about. In 1997, when the vehicle, textile, clothing and footwear industry unions ran a community-based campaign against further tariff cuts, the new ALP leadership backed it strongly. When the Howard Government ignited the waterfront dispute in 1998, leading Labor figures were keen to be seen down on the docks on the side of the maritime workers. This approach in Opposition in the first two and a half years after 1996 was expressed in the new ALP platform adopted in 1998 and it aided the ALP's recovery of some support (a 1.3 percentage point increase in the primary vote, which translated into a net gain of 19 seats), at the October 1998 Australian election.

A startling outcome of the 1998 election however was that, in terms of voting support, the centrist Australian Democrats ceased to be the principal 'other' party in

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<sup>13</sup> J. Brett, (untitled Opinion page column), *The Age*, 11 October 1996.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp 188-189.

Australian politics. Instead, the principal other party was Pauline Hanson's One Nation, newly formed to oppose immigrants, 'special treatment' for Aborigines, and neo-liberal economics. It captured more than 8 per cent of the primary vote (nearly one million votes) in the House of Representatives. The surge of support for this new party, compared with the very modest improvement in Labor's own primary vote, showed the strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the mainstream political system and the policies which had been pursued by both major parties.

This undercurrent became further visible with the widespread rejection of the limited model for a new Australian head of state presented in the November 1999 referendum on whether Australia should move from a constitutional monarchy to a republic. The main slogan of the 'No' campaigners in the 1999 republic referendum was "Vote No to the Politicians' Republic". The campaigners for the 'No' case did not defend the monarchy. Instead, they focused on attacking the particular republican model on offer, which proposed to give parliament rather than the people the vote in determining who the new head of state would be. Many, perhaps most, who voted 'No' then may therefore have voted 'Yes' to a different republican model (as many opinion polls have regularly suggested). Instead, a majority of Australian voters were mobilised into expressing a vague and generalised anti-political sentiment. Helen Irving notes the widely-held view that "this particular referendum failed because it represented the aspirations of an 'elite' and it alienated the 'people', especially the 'battlers'" (while also noting the imprecise nature of the definition of these 'elites' and the perceived desires of these 'battlers').<sup>15</sup>

Malcolm MacKerras and William Maley show that in the 1999 referendum "the greater the socio-economic advantage of the seat the more likely it was to vote for the republic".<sup>16</sup> Using data produced by the Parliamentary Library in 1998 on the socio-economic indexes of electoral divisions, they report how, whereas the 148 electorates Australia-wide split more than two-to-one in favour of No, the 34 most socio-economically advantaged electorates split more than two-to-one in favour of Yes.<sup>17</sup> This data shows that 23 out of the 34 richest electorates in Australia voted Yes; and that of these 23, 16 were Liberal-held electorates.<sup>18</sup> Support for the republic model was strongest in inner metropolitan Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, or in seats where there were high numbers of migrants from non English-speaking countries.<sup>19</sup> Ian McAllister highlights how "support for the republic varied...from a low of 22.8% in the rural Queensland electorate of Maranoa to 70.9% in the inner-city electorate of

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<sup>15</sup> H. Irving, 'The Republic Referendum of 6 November 1999', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 2000, p 112.

<sup>16</sup> M. MacKerras and W. Maley, '1999 Republic Referendum Results: Some Reflections', in J. Warhurst and M. Mackerras (eds), *Constitutional Politics: The Republic Referendum and the Future*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002, p 96.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p 104.

<sup>18</sup> Computed from Table 8.16, in MacKerras and Maley, p 106.

<sup>19</sup> MacKerras and Maley, pp 105, 108.

Melbourne".<sup>20</sup> He also notes that "each additional percentage point of the first-preference vote that One Nation attracted in the electorate in the 1998 election reduced support for...the republic...by around one percentage point – a substantial effect".<sup>21</sup>

Labor could have responded to the swelling political dissatisfaction evident in the results of the 1998 election and the 1999 republic referendum by further differentiating itself from the Coalition parties on economic policy. Michael Pusey's recent book, based on extensive survey work, demonstrates the widespread continuing opposition to, and anger about, the imposition of market-oriented economic reforms on Australians over the last two decades, especially among those in manual and lower service jobs<sup>22</sup> and the very strong majority support which exists for policies to lessen the gap between rich and poor.<sup>23</sup> Instead of further developing Labor's policies to respond to such concerns, however, Beazley and other leading ALP figures after the October 1998 election signalled that, having attained a desired improvement in the core vote, they would now take this for granted (modest though the improvement actually was) and they set about pursuing what they conceptualised to be upwardly mobile voters with "aspirations". A resultant failure to offer real and relevant policy alternatives for their previously alienated and economically disadvantaged voters was an underlying reason for Labor's defeat in 2001.

Labor lost 34 seats in 1996. It won back 19 in 1998. But only one seat (Ballarat, in rural Victoria) on the Coalition side of the Federal election pendulum crossed to Labor in the November 2001 election. This particular seat gain occurred largely because of the retirement of a popular sitting member who had a strong personal vote followed by a local fiasco over, and late change of, the Liberals' replacement candidate. The Liberal Party however picked up 4 seats which had been held by Labor (Dickson, Canning, Patterson and Dobell). In addition, the Liberal Party retained two seats which had been notionally allocated to the Labor side of the pendulum after redistribution (Parramatta and Macarthur, both in outer western Sydney).

The defeat of Labor in 2001 occurred despite the fact that people who had voted for the Coalition Government in 1998 were thought to have become well and truly aggrieved by the effects of its introduction of a new Goods and Services Tax and by the state of the economy in early 2001. Doubts which persisted about Labor and what

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<sup>20</sup> I. McAllister, 'Elections Without Cues: The 1999 Australian Republic Referendum', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 2, July 2001, p 254.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p 255.

<sup>22</sup> M. Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp 53-62 and *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p 38.

it stood for were unexpectedly magnified by later events originating outside Australia which made voters want decisiveness and strength from their leaders.

Newspoll data on public voting intentions published in *The Australian* newspaper<sup>24</sup> (see Figure 1 below) show that after the 1998 election the level of support for Labor and the Coalition generally ebbed and flowed below or above 40 per cent - although from about the beginning of 2001 a big gap opened up in the ALP's favour. The Howard Coalition Government then steadily built back support through policy compromises such as the postponement and modification of the full sale of Telstra, and by generally opening its purse strings and spending more. These moves at the time were seen as probably coming too late to impress the voters enough to change the result of the election which would be held later in 2001, although Labor's lead in the polls steadily narrowed. The question very much remained though whether in government Labor would do things much differently. In the election campaign Kim Beazley tried strenuously but belatedly to convince voters that there was a clear choice and there were things that he did stand for, to widen the sense of policy choice and to combat the widespread view that there is so little difference between the parties that you may as well just vote for what's best for you materially as an individual (e.g. for the party with a better recent record of delivering lower interest rates on your mortgage repayments).

There may have been clear policy choices between the two major parties on Aboriginal reconciliation (especially with Labor's pledge to give an apology to the 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal children), and, on close inspection, between their stated commitments to public education and hospitals, but the extent of these choices were limited by the ALP's promises to not disturb the Budget surplus and to not raise taxes. Indeed, Labor insisted at times that it would run bigger budget surpluses than the Coalition: which made it difficult to convince voters that it could really do enough of substance to make a difference in tackling the funding shortfalls in the public education and health systems.<sup>25</sup>

The strategists who had taken control after 1998 were also so concerned to make the ALP a "small target" that the Party became almost invisible when the electoral focus suddenly turned onto immigration, defence and foreign affairs issues. When Prime Minister Howard made his hard-line stand against accepting any of the mostly Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers rescued from drowning by the passing Norwegian vessel, the *Tampa*, near Australian territorial waters in August 2001, he effectively regained the primary votes of many One Nation Party supporters. McAllister's analysis of 2001 AES data indicates that three quarters of the voters who defected

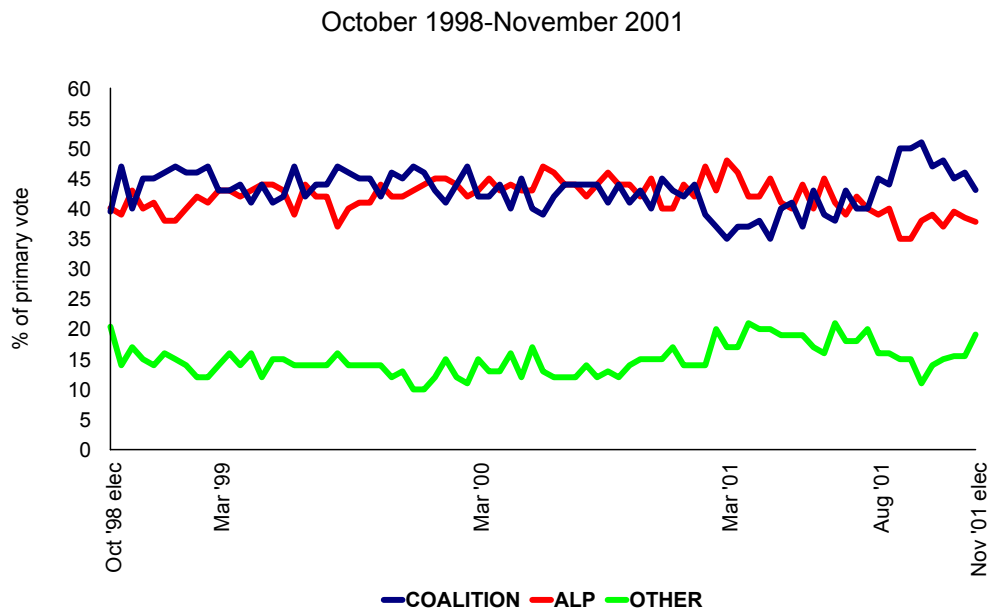
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<sup>24</sup> Newspoll Market Research, Sydney. Details accessed at: <http://www.newspoll.com.au>

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent critique of, and outline of alternatives to, prevailing Labor economic orthodoxy in this period see T. Battin, 'The Australian Labor Party and the Notion of Economic Management', *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2002, pp 1-15.

from One Nation between 1998 and 2001 moved their vote to the Coalition parties.<sup>26</sup> The general climate of international insecurity following the September 11 attacks in the United States overshadowed the election campaign. After the *Tampa* incident and the events in the US, support for Howard's Coalition government rocketed, as Figure 1 shows.

**Figure 1 Federal voting intention**



Source: Newspoll

While the ALP's vote fell and the Coalition parties' aggregate vote rose in 2001 compared to 1998, support for parties other than Labor and the Coalition in 2001 stayed at almost the same levels as the high vote for 'other parties' reached at the 1998 election, despite the halving of the 1998 One Nation vote. This was because a significant number of ALP voters who objected to Labor's support of Howard's position on asylum seekers moved their first preference vote particularly to the Greens, the Party which took the clearest stance against Australia's rejection of the asylum seekers rescued by the *Tampa*. The Greens vote doubled - to the detriment of Labor's primary vote which fell to its lowest level for more than six decades. McAllister's analysis of the 2001 AES data indicates that over half of the defectors from Labor went to the Democrats and Greens, and that these voters were "motivated by seeing refugees and asylum-seekers as important".<sup>27</sup>

Other Newspoll data periodically published in *The Australian* newspaper sets out the issues on which people say they vote. According to that data, the Labor Party has

<sup>26</sup> I. McAllister, 'Border Protection, the 2001 Australian Election and the Coalition Victory', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 3, November 2003, p 450.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p 453.

mostly in the last three years been regarded as better at handling the issues of education, health and Medicare, the environment, industrial relations, and Aboriginal and native title issues. The Coalition parties however have mostly been regarded as better at handling the issues of taxation, interest rates, inflation, immigration, and defence.

This Newspoll data shows that the issue of immigration catapulted in importance from 30 to 50 per cent of those surveyed between June and September 2001, in which period the *Tampa* incident occurred; and the issue of defence rose in importance for voters from 38 to 44 per cent from June to September and further up to 50 percent importance by February 2002, after the September 11 2001 attacks in the US and the military responses following those attacks.<sup>28</sup>

So, in one sense, what happened in the November 2001 Australian national election was simply that enough Australian voters decided to vote for the Party they saw as best suited to dealing with the issues which they thought were particularly important at that time. When the emphasis comes back onto Labor's favoured policy ground, then, the ALP's standing could be expected to improve.

Senior journalist Geoffrey Barker expressed the widespread interpretation of the November 10 2001 Australian national election result when he wrote that:

On polling day, Labor's vote bled away from the Right and from the Left. Labor's blue-collar conservative constituency and much of middle Australia turned to the Coalition because they saw Labor as weak on the issue of asylum seekers...Labor's social progressive constituency turned to the Greens and Democrats because it saw Labor abandoning humanitarian obligations to asylum seekers.

In defeat, Beazley's consolation was his conviction that Labor's election loss would have been much greater possibly devastating if the party had not adopted the Government's approach to immigration. This might or might not be true. It is untestable.<sup>29</sup>

Barker further wrote that:

immigration is a policy area that can bring into conflict the vestigial protectionism/racism of Labor's conservative blue-collar constituencies with the idealistic internationalism of its soft-left middle-class constituencies. Until the Whitlam government implemented non-discriminatory immigration, Labor had

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<sup>28</sup> Newspoll Market Research, Sydney. Details accessed at: <http://www.newspoll.com.au>

<sup>29</sup> G. Barker, 'The Issue that Could Split Labor', *Australian Financial Review*, 2-3 February 2002.

routinely supported discriminatory immigration policies to assuage trade union fears of cheap Asian labour.<sup>30</sup>

Many assumptions are being made in statements of this kind, however, about the political sociology of different occupational groups. Accuracy in this debate is often clouded by the tendency to lapse into loose and even derogatory and judgemental categorisations of various ill-defined social groups. Those who subscribe to what might be termed the 'cultural analysis' of Labor's lost core voters for instance regularly contrast their heroic version of the Anglo blue-collar "battlers" with the "elites" or "chattering classes" or "trendies" or "caffe latte belt" or "chardonnay set" which they see as residing in the inner cities and imposing cosmopolitan values upon their outer-suburban heroes. But is there really such a clear dichotomy between the two main components of the Australian Labor Party's constituency? Is it not possible to be economically protectionist without being racist? Is it not possible to be economically redistributive and socially liberal?

There is in fact no evidence from the Australian Election Study that the *Tampa* and terrorism issues particularly caused blue-collar Labor 'heartland' voters to switch to the Coalition parties in 2001. As Table 1 (above) showed, there was actually a slight *rise* in the ALP's blue-collar support between 1998 and 2001; compared with a sharp drop in the ALP's white-collar support. The view that the *Tampa* and terrorism issues caused some blue-collar Labor voters to switch to the Coalition parties is also not supported by looking at the primary vote movements in seats and available data on the proportions of various occupations in seats.<sup>31</sup> The 2001 census data is now available congruent with the boundaries of the electorates contested at the 2001 national election. When a statistical analysis is done of correlations between the proportions of blue-collar workers<sup>32</sup> and the primary vote changes<sup>33</sup> in the 150 seats contested at the 2001 election, what in fact emerges is that seats with higher proportions of blue-collar workers<sup>34</sup> were no more likely – indeed were less likely - to swing to the Coalition than to the ALP ( $r= 0.06$  and  $0.19$  respectively). It is clear, however, when a statistical analysis is done of correlations between proportions of people in professional occupations<sup>35</sup> and the primary vote changes in the 150 seats contested at the 2001 election, that seats with high proportions of people in professional occupations<sup>36</sup> were more likely to swing to the Greens ( $r=0.46$ ).

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> For definitive testing of this view a disaggregated analysis of census data would be required.

<sup>32</sup> A. Koprás, *Electorate Rankings: Census 2001*, Research Paper No. 2 2002-03, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2003, Table 42b.

<sup>33</sup> As set out in detail seat by seat with swings in Australian Electoral Commission, *Election 2001: Election Results*, CD-ROM, Canberra, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> That is, "tradespersons, labourers and related workers (Census Occupation codes 4 and 9)...Ranked on tradespersons and labourers as a percentage of total employment": Koprás, *Electorate Rankings: Census 2001*, p 11.

<sup>35</sup> Koprás, *Electorate Rankings: Census 2001*, Table 41b

<sup>36</sup> That is, "managers, administrators and professionals (Census Occupation codes 1 and 2)...Ranked on persons in professional employment as a percentage of total employment": Koprás, *Electorate Rankings: Census 2001*, p 11.

The biggest swings to the Greens did occur in inner-city areas of Melbourne and Sydney. Many of those who shifted their primary votes from the ALP to the Greens in these inner suburbs of the major cities are likely to have been young people, especially tertiary students, attracted by the Greens Party's clear stance against the two major parties on the issue of asylum seekers. This is a significant loss by the ALP of support in areas which have for a long time been crucial sources of its own activists. Shaun Wilson, on the basis of 2001 AES data, shows that "Green voters [now] represent a constituency that goes beyond traditional environmentalism...[and also] that the Greens are no more ideologically distant from Labor voters than the Labor Party itself, and may be appealing to large numbers of left-leaning Labor voters".<sup>37</sup> Further, he finds, a similar proportion of Green voters as Labor voters agrees with the proposition that "income and wealth should be redistributed", in stark contrast to Coalition voters among whom the proportion favouring redistribution is much lower.<sup>38</sup> In this respect it is worth noting that 55.8 per cent of all respondents to the 2001 AES agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary working people" whereas only 17.6 disagreed or strongly disagreed (a further 26.6% neither agreed or disagreed).<sup>39</sup> Wilson reports 67 per cent support for this statement in favour of redistribution among Greens voters, 69 per cent among Labor voters but only 43 per cent among Coalition voters.<sup>40</sup>

Wilson, in collaboration with Nick Turnbull, has separately emphasised how economic insecurity played a strong part in the rise in support for One Nation.<sup>41</sup> Wilson (who is also a contributor to Pusey's 2003 book) argued in an article just prior to the 2001 election, on the basis of data from the 1996 and 1998 AES, that:

insecurity among working-class respondents is higher than among middle-class respondents. This is to be expected given...the decline of manufacturing and other working-class vocations over the past two decades. Almost two in five

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<sup>37</sup> S. Wilson, 'The Emergence of the Green Electorate in Australia', *AQ (Australian Quarterly) Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, Vol. 74, Issue 6, November-December 2002, pp 19, 20.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p 21

<sup>39</sup> C. Bean, D. Gow and I. McAllister, 'Australian Election Study, 2001' [computer file], Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2002, D14P4. Detail accessed at:

<http://assda.anu.edu.au/codebooks/aes2001/4vars.html#D14P4>

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, 'The Emergence of the Green Electorate', p 21.

<sup>41</sup> N. Turnbull and S. Wilson, 'The Two Faces of Economic Insecurity: Reply to Goot and Watson on One Nation', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 47, No.4, 2001, pp 512-515. This article followed M. Goot and I. Watson, 'One Nation's Electoral Support: Where Does It Come From, What Makes It Different, and How Does It Fit?', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 47, No. 2, June 2001, pp 159-191 and other analyses including I. McAllister and C. Bean, 'The Electoral Politics of Economic Reform in Australia: The 1998 Election', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 3, November 2000, pp 383-399. McAllister and Bean had found (at p 396) from 1998 AES data "support for the view that ONP [One Nation Party] supporters were motivated by economic insecurity and were drawn from the social groups most affected by the economic restructuring and globalisation of trade that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s".

respondents who described themselves as working class were "very worried" about the employment prospects of members of their households. Such disturbing levels of insecurity naturally provide the grounds for deep resentments, which eventually find their way into - and start to shape - politics.<sup>42</sup>

Further, there is in particular the:

propensity for working-class households in rural and regional areas to associate their insecurity with the view that "immigrants take jobs"... insecure, non-urban working-class voters have...contributed to One Nation's past successes... [and] the recent shift in immigration and refugee policy appeals directly to [them]... Howard's initiatives are seen to be doing something about a range of insecurities in the areas of law and order, employment and culture that these voters think are exacerbated by immigration.<sup>43</sup>

In his pre 2001 election piece Wilson argued that:

the ALP...needs to focus on credible measures for reducing job and social insecurity among voters, particularly outside the cities...policies that reduce [the] inequalities that produce resentment

...The ALP...[should be] playing up the divide between it and the Government on employment, health and education, which all remain major concerns of the public and areas of policy failure... Strong differentiation of social democratic parties on traditional issues that attract working-class support - employment, public education and health care - are the best means principled left-of-centre parties have of maintaining broad support... Policies that capture long-term aspirations - like public sector job creation or a bold policy to extend Medicare to dental care - would give the ALP substantial domestic policy leverage.<sup>44</sup>

In his analysis of AES data after the 2001 election, Wilson, now in collaboration with Breusch, argues somewhat more cautiously. He finds that, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is most in favour of redistribution and 5 least, blue-collar workers rank 2.16 while professionals rank 2.50.<sup>45</sup> This he and Bresusch consider to be a very large difference which adds to the political difficulty of Labor now pursuing "a conventionally social democratic alliance of socially progressive policies and redistributive, market-

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<sup>42</sup> S. Wilson, 'The Wedge Election: The Battle for Australia's Disaffected Voters', *AQ (Australian Quarterly) Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, Vol. 73, Issue 4, September-October 2001, p 10.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, pp 10-12, 14-15.

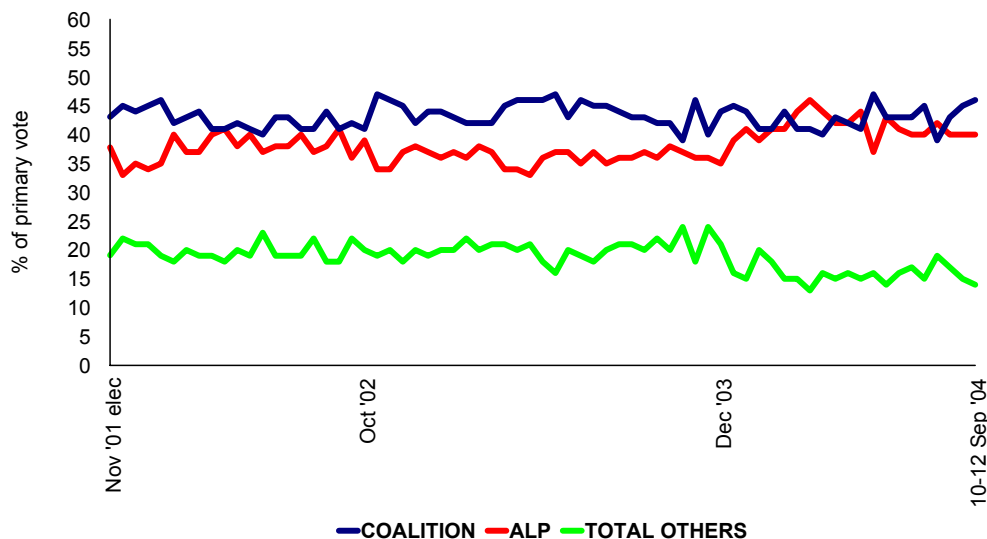
<sup>45</sup> S. Wilson and T. Breusch, 'Where the Divides Lie: Public and Political Opinion about Government and Public Policy', Paper delivered to a Workshop co-sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and the National Institute of Social Sciences and Law, The Australian National University, 10-11 July 2003, p 11. I am grateful to the authors for their permission to cite this paper.

modifying economic policy”<sup>46</sup>. It may be a statistically significant difference - but these variations of view by no means seem so far apart that they could not be accommodated within a coalition of Labor electoral supporters with the provision of effective political leadership.

After Mark Latham replaced the personally unpopular Simon Crean as Labor Leader in December 2003, Labor’s primary vote rapidly rose from the previous lows it had stagnated at for more than a year after the October 2002 Bali bombing. The honeymoon around Latham’s fresh persona appeared to give the ALP a better prospect of winning the next national election, to be held on 9 October 2004.

**Figure 2 Federal voting intention**

November 2001-September 2004



Source: Newspoll

Comparison of Figures 1 and 2, however, indicates that Latham has never established as large or as long a primary vote lead for Labor in 2004 as Beazley had in 2001. It is uncertain whether Latham can sustain the recent boost in ALP support to prevent a fourth consecutive national election defeat for the Australian Labor Party. It is also far from clear what his policies are or will be in the future. In the past he has personally espoused a contradictory range of ideas including many hard-right economic and social policies.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p 14.

<sup>47</sup> For the most comprehensive and illuminating analysis of Latham’s output published to date, see C. Johnson, 'From the Suburbs: Mark Latham and the Ideology of the ALP', Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Tasmania, Hobart 29 September - 1 October 2003. Accessible at: <http://www.utas.edu.au/government/APSA/CJohnsonfinal.pdf>

The Newspoll data shows that the proportion of voters saying that immigration issues are very important in how they would vote in a federal election has fallen from 50 per cent just before the October 2001 election to 35 per cent in the latest issues poll available at time of writing (which is for June 2004), and the advantage of the Coalition parties over Labor in terms of who voters think would best handle this issue has reduced from 19 to 11 percentage points. The Newspoll data also shows that the proportion of voters nominating Health and Medicare as very important has risen from 77 per cent to 82 per cent in the same period, although Labor's advantage as the party to best handle this issue has slipped slightly following the Coalition government's extensive 'Strengthening Medicare' advertising campaign in 2004. The proportion nominating education as a very important issue has risen from 79 to 80 per cent in the same time period, and Labor's advantage as the party to best handle this issue has risen from 8 to 10 percentage points. However, the importance of defence as an issue remains even higher than the levels it rose to around the time of the 2001 election - recorded as 54 per cent in June 2004 - and the Coalition parties remain nearly twice as favoured as Labor to handle this issue, as they are likewise on the issue of 'national security' (polled for the first time by Newspoll in June 2004). The Coalition parties are also still clearly favoured on taxation issues, and more than twice as favoured as Labor to handle the issues of interest rates and inflation.

Australian Labor's policy under Latham as Leader still tends to pay only cosmetic attention to those affected by economic dislocation and accelerating inequality, and it still tends to uncritically adhere to neo-liberal budgetary prescriptions. To the extent that Australian Labor has actually rebuilt any support since losing office under Keating in 1996, it did so by distancing itself from the social and electoral damage done by the neo-liberal policies which it pursued from 1983 to 1996. This is a point which Labor would now benefit from focusing upon further.

When its electoral support is viewed in historical perspective what becomes clear is that the ALP has, above all, failed to restore the primary vote it lost in 1996. Labor's lost voters have in elections since 1984 disproportionately been working-class voters alienated by the insecurities and inequalities generated by the free market economic policies of the last Labor governments. If his past individual utterances are any guide, the current Leader Mark Latham would pursue these policies even more strongly. Focusing on so-called 'aspirational' voters is unlikely to be as effective for Labor as seeking to win back its lost working-class voters by breaking the long-running two party consensus on market-oriented economic reforms and pursuing a redistributive economic policy.

If the ALP would outline a policy to tackle inequality based on credibly costed measures, including raising of more revenue by enforcing tax obligations on the very wealthy who have been avoiding paying their fair share, then the salience of the

cultural issues recently relied on by the Coalition parties would be likely to reduce and Labor's prospects of reshaping a winning coalition of support would rise.

The evidence that pursuit of redistributive economic policies would be strongly supported by both Greens voters and blue-collar workers, as well as current Labor voters, makes it an obvious instrument for the ALP to now use in order to weave back together some of the diverse strands of its frayed constituency.

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