

Back To The Future? The November 2001 federal election

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Until August 2001 most observers thought that John Howard's Liberal-National Party Coalition Government was heading for defeat at national elections likely to be held at the end of the year. In the event his government retained office with the largest swing to an incumbent since the 1966 elections.

The Background

By all the laws of politics, in April 2001 the Howard Government was on death row awaiting execution. Implementation of the GST and the inadequacies of the compensation package had alienated core supporters such as retirees and small business. Rural and regional Australia seemed to be in the grip of a populist reaction to globalisation and social change unlike anything seen since the Depression. Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party had successfully tapped into this and channelled many traditional supporters away from the Coalition. The 'battlers' in key mortgage belt seats, struggling to make ends meet and concerned with the state of essential services such as health and education, seemed ready to desert Howard in droves. The 'elites', who had never accepted Howard's legitimacy in office and were unforgiving of his social conservatism, maintained an unremitting campaign of strident attacks. Key economic indicators looked threatening: the dollar fell below 50 cents to the American dollar for the first time; HIH Insurance collapsed spectacularly.

To add to the Government's problems, it had a large number of marginal seats that it held very narrowly. A uniform swing of 0.8 per cent would see it swept from office. The State electoral trend was running strongly to Labor as shown by the defeat of the Court Government in Western Australia on 10 February and

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the ALP's landslide re-election in Queensland a week later. Then came the Government's loss of the safe seat of Ryan in a by-election on 17 March occasioned by resignation of former Defence Minister John Moore. Although doubts remained about the Opposition's credibility and lack of policies, the majority of voters seemed so disillusioned with the Government that they would vote for anyone to oust it.

In May, an internal memo from Liberal President Shane Stone to Howard was leaked. It accused the Government of being 'out of touch' with its supporters and public opinion, 'reactive rather than proactive,' 'far behind public sentiment' and 'too tricky' on some issues. Deputy Liberal Leader Peter Costello was said to be 'the main offender.' The source of the leak was unclear. However, speculation that it came from the Prime Minister's office did not help relations between Howard and his Deputy and created a damaging impression of internal disunity.¹

Faced with what seemed an impossible task, Howard fought back. He spent every spare moment working the marginals. The Government became tighter and more focussed. There was no more loose politics. A campaign to win back the support of disaffected groups commenced in earnest. Changes were made to ease the burden on small business of the unpopular GST Business Activity Statement. A proposal to tax trusts as companies that was deeply unpopular with farmers was scrapped. Indexation of excise on petrol was abandoned in response to much anger about rising fuel prices. Beer drinkers also received some tax relief. First home buyers were given an increased subsidy. The May 2001 Budget was a big spending one. In particular, it delivered a number of significant concessions to older Australians, including tax breaks to self-funded retirees and a \$300 one-off payment for pensioners. In June, social security debts owed by more than 500,000 families due to over payment were waived.

That all this was starting to pay off was shown when the Liberal Party narrowly retained the outer-Melbourne seat of Aston at a by-election on 14 July notwithstanding a swing of 3.6 per cent against it. The Coalition was given a significant morale boost by this check to what had seemed like an endless downward spiral in its fortunes.

The ALP was having some problems of its own. The launch in July of one of its key policies — Knowledge Nation — was less than successful. Many commentators attacked the package as incomprehensible verbiage. Howard responded by asking Opposition Leader Kim Beazley to 'spare us the spaghetti-and-meatball flow charts, tell us what you're going to do and how you're going to pay for it.'²

¹ *Australian*, 5.5.01.

² *Australian*, 4.7.01; *SMH*, 4.7.01.

Howard also hinted at making income tax relief an election issue to counter Labor's plans for a GST rollback, for so long its policy centre-piece. Opposition front bencher Bob McMullan responded by saying that tax relief, including rollback, was a secondary issue compared to dealing with the 'crisis' in health and education. This allowed Howard to accuse the ALP of failing to have a clear policy direction.³

The news on the economy was better. The increased subsidy for first home buyers was a runaway success and was lifting the building industry out of its post GST slump. Interest rates were at a record low. Economic growth appeared to be picking up again. The low dollar was flowing through into improved rural commodity prices.

By the beginning of August, it seemed that the Government had reversed the decline in its fortunes and had rebuilt much of its electoral base. However, the polls showed that it was still not in a winning position. Then, on 27 August the Norwegian freighter *Tampa* sailed over the horizon, destined to become the best known ship in Australian history since *Endeavour*. On board were 434 mostly Afghani boat people, rescued when their vessel sank on its way from Indonesia. The Government decided to get tough and refused to allow *Tampa* to enter Australian waters. When the Captain ignored this and tried to land at Christmas Island, the Defence Force took control of the vessel. The ensuing impasse was resolved when Nauru agreed to accept most of the asylum seekers pending assessment of their claims for refugee status by the United Nations. A further group went to New Zealand. After initially taking a bipartisan approach, Labor combined with the Australian Democrats in the Senate on 29 August to defeat emergency legislation to confirm the Government's powers to remove *Tampa* from Australian waters. Subsequently, the Opposition changed its position again and supported a package of seven bills to validate the Government's actions and increase its powers in regard to asylum seekers which was passed on 26 September. By this time it was clear that the Government's stand had overwhelming support in the community. An A.C. Nielsen poll published on 4 September showed 77 per cent agreed with the Government's decision to refuse to allow *Tampa* to enter Australian waters.⁴

On 11 September came the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon followed by the war on terrorism. The resulting climate of widespread uncertainty combined with the immigration issue to give Howard and the Government a massive boost in the polls as the tables below show.

³ *SMH*, 15.8.01.

⁴ *SMH*, 4.9.01

Table 1
A.C. Nielsen: Two-Party Preferred Vote
February–September 2001

<i>Survey</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>ALP</i>
	%	%
February	44	56
March	41	59
April	40	60
May (4–6)	44	56
May (25–27)	43	57
August (10–12)	47	53
September (21–23)	57	43

Source: SMH, 13.3.01; 10.4.01; 29.5.01; 14.8.01; 25.9.01.

Table 2
Newspoll: Primary Vote
January–September 2001

<i>Survey</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>ALP</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Greens</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
19–21 January	44	42	2	4	3
23–25 February	37	43	7	3	5
23–25 March	37	46	5	5	3
20–22 April	38	42	3	9	4
25–27 May	41	40	6	6	3
29 June–1 July	39	45	4	6	3
27–29 July	43	39	4	8	3
10–12 August	40	42	3	7	4
24–26 August	40	40	5	6	5
31 August–2 September	45	39	4	6	3
7–9 September	44	40	4	5	3
21–23 September	50	35	3	5	3

Source: <www.newspoll.com.au>

Table 3
Newspoll: Better Prime Minister
January–September 2001

	<i>John Howard</i>	<i>Kim Beazley</i>	<i>Uncommitted</i>
	%	%	%
19–21 January 2001	44	30	26
23–25 February 2001	38	36	26
23–25 March 2001	35	41	24
20–22 April 2001	40	38	22
25–27 May 2001	39	39	22
29 June–1 July 2001	39	36	25
27–29 July 2001	42	35	23
10–12 August	41	36	23
24–26 August 2001	42	32	26
31 August–2 September 2001	47	32	21
7–9 September 2001	48	30	22
21–23 September 2001	57	25	18

Source: <www.newspoll.com.au>

The Campaign

The last possible date for a House of Representatives election was 12 January 2002. On Friday 5 October, Howard announced that there would be an election for the House and a periodical election for half the Senate on 10 November. The first two weeks of the campaign were dominated by the war on terrorism and boat people. The bombing of Afghanistan began the day after the election was called. Howard subsequently announced Australia was committing military forces and made the most of every opportunity to be seen with the troops. There was a series of anthrax scares in the United States. Boatloads of illegal immigrants continued to arrive and, in one case, according to the Government, children were deliberately thrown overboard to prevent the boat being forced out of Australian waters. At the end of the second week of campaigning the Prime Minister attended the APEC summit in Shanghai and was photographed rubbing shoulders with U.S. President George W. Bush and other world leaders.

Howard made the most of all this, playing the statesman and constantly talking of the need for strong leadership in a time of crisis. He emphasised his firm stand on

maintaining ‘the integrity of our border protection system.’⁵ Liberal Party advertising stressed Howard’s ability to take tough decisions.

In a desperate bid to make up ground and shift the campaign focus to domestic issues, Beazley began a blitz of policy announcements. He said that Labor would be focussing on ‘the issues that we think are important to the Australian people . . . jobs . . . health . . . education . . . the pressure on families.’⁶ The Opposition Leader backed the Government on the war on terrorism and the commitment of Australian forces. The ALP was also forced into a bipartisan approach on boat people. However, there was some attempt at policy differentiation, with a plan for a coast guard for border protection and Labor’s claim that it would be better able to negotiate an agreement with Indonesia to prevent the flow of illegal immigrants. Beazley faced a no-win situation over the immigration issue. His only options were either to take a stand that was obviously out of step with what the majority of the electorate wanted or to be seen as weakly following the Government’s lead.

The ALP decided to ‘go negative’ at this early stage. It ran an advertisement highlighting Howard’s failure to commit himself to serving a full term and claiming that a vote for Howard was, in fact, a vote for Costello. While Labor may have gained some advantage from the fact that Costello was less popular than Howard, the down side was that such advertising also highlighted the issue of leadership which was one of the Government’s key campaign messages.

More positive for Beazley was the only televised debate between the leaders on Sunday 14 October from which he was generally acknowledged to have emerged the clear winner. As well as lifting Labor morale, Beazley’s stature was boosted and he began to look like a serious contender.

However, a problem emerged for Labor in the week after the debate when it was revealed that the Budget surplus had shrunk to \$500 million, thanks largely to the Government’s spending spree earlier in the year to buy its way out of political trouble. This greatly reduced the scope for the Opposition’s much vaunted GST rollback. As well, Labor’s attempt to recover ground in the campaign by unveiling a plethora of attractive policies was now constrained if it was to remain economically credible.

Beazley released the details of the rollback package on Friday 19 October. The GST would be lifted on nappies, sanitary products, textbooks and funerals. More significantly, energy bills would be GST exempt. Howard quickly pointed out that Labor’s package, in fact, kept \$29 out of every \$30 raised by the GST. He quipped that ‘they’ve laboured mightily and produced a mouse of a rollover.’⁷ More

⁵ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Four Corners, Fear and Polling Timeline: Four Corner’s Timeline of the 2001 Federal Election*, <www.abc.net.au/4_corners/>, 6.10.01.

⁶ *Ibid*, 5.10.01.

⁷ *Ibid*, 19.10.01.

positively for Labor, the rollback launch focussed attention on the unpopularity of the GST's implementation and the inadequacies of the compensation package, particularly for groups like retirees. The energy rebate was also attractive electoral bait.

The third week of campaigning brought a decided change. The war smoke began to clear and Labor's emphasis on issues like health, education and aged care began to resonate with the voters. The Government was in danger of being seen as having no domestic agenda and trying to bluff its way into a third term on the back of the immigration issue and the international situation. Opinion polls indicated the gap was narrowing. An A C Nielsen poll released on 23 October showed that since the first week of the campaign the Coalition's two-party preferred vote had fallen four points to 51 per cent. A Newspoll taken over 19/21 October had the Government on 52 per cent of the two-party preferred vote compared to 55.5 per cent a week earlier. More suspect was a Morgan poll actually showing Labor ahead with 51.5 per cent on a two-party preferred basis.⁸ If this decline in its vote was a continuing trend, the Government was in trouble. The election began to appear more of a contest.

The announcement by the Australian Democrats that, contrary to their usual practice of issuing a split ticket, they were directing preferences to the Opposition in key marginal seats in return for Senate preferences was another boost for Labor. The Coalition also received some Democrat preferences but only in relatively safe seats where they would make little difference.

On 23 October the asylum seeker issue once again intruded into the campaign to the Opposition's disadvantage. Commenting on the death of more than 350 on a boat that sank making its way from Indonesia, Beazley said it revealed 'a failure of policy.'⁹ Howard immediately seized on this to accuse the Opposition Leader of seeking to make political capital from the tragedy. This incident put into stark relief the problem with Labor's position on asylum seekers, vacillating opportunistically between bipartisanship and point scoring.

The next week marked a new phase in the Coalition campaign. Howard the statesman was replaced by Howard the dogged street fighter. The Government's emphasis switched to the home front with the announcement of a raft of policy initiatives, beginning with Howard's policy launch on Sunday 28 October in Sydney's CBD. The centre-piece was a tax rebate for mothers of newborn children who leave the workforce that would deliver up to \$2,500 a year with a guaranteed minimum of \$500. There was also an aged care package worth \$416 million over four years. More funds were promised for the fight against illicit drugs. A law and order element was introduced with a call for a greater Commonwealth involvement in law enforcement. Howard stressed his leadership qualities and credentials as a

⁸ *SMH*, 23.10.01; *Australian*, 23.10.01; *Bulletin*, 30.10.01.

⁹ *SMH*, 24.10.01.

good economic manager. He also reiterated his determination to control who came into Australia and how. While hardly an inspiring speaker, Howard punched his message home determinedly.

Telstra also became a major issue in the fourth week of the campaign when, in the Coalition's first major stumble, Costello revealed a timetable for its complete sell-off. The re-emergence of the possibility of sale of a further stake in Telstra was dangerous for the Coalition for it could potentially alienate rural voters that the Government had spent so much time getting back on side. Howard tried to defuse the issue by stressing that there would be no sale unless telecommunications in the bush were greatly improved. Fortunately for the Government, Beazley was put on the defensive when it was revealed that he had participated in discussions on the sale of Telstra as a Minister in the Keating Government in 1995.

Beazley's launched his policy at Hurstville in suburban Sydney on Wednesday 31 October. The main theme was 'Knowledge Nation'. Beazley promised more money for schools, including \$176 million for more specialist teachers in behaviour management and literacy and numeracy. Universities would receive a \$1 billion improvement package. Research funding would be boosted. There would be a program to create 35,000 high skill apprenticeships. The Opposition Leader also emphasised his commitment to a fairer health and aged care system. He reiterated the Opposition's support for the war on terrorism and border protection. Sensitive to the Government's attacks on his economic credentials, Beazley stressed that his program was properly costed and affordable. He promised to keep the Budget in surplus and not to introduce any new taxes.

In terms of style and presentation, Beazley probably won the launches as he had won the debate. Education was also an issue of great concern to the voters. However, the 'Knowledge Nation' package was complex and detailed, lacking one stand out item with electoral bite.

Just after the launch, Labor's campaign was again derailed by intrusion of the international situation. A claim by a Taliban spokesman that a jihad had been declared against Australia received massive publicity. At the same time, Beazley was forced to discipline the ALP candidate for Gilmore who had publicly stated that the United States had brought the 11 September terrorist attacks on itself.

As the blackout on electronic advertising on the Wednesday before polling day approached, the Government unleashed an advertising blitz. In the first three weeks of the campaign, by contrast, Labor had greatly outspent the Liberals. Coalition advertisements stressed the need for a strong leader like Howard in uncertain times and pointed to his tough stand on border protection. Beazley's economic credibility and alleged policy vacillation were attacked.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Age*, 30.10.01; *SMH*, 31.10.01.

Going into the final week, Howard maintained the Coalition's momentum by releasing a package of superannuation concessions on Monday 4 November. By contrast, Labor appeared to have stalled after making up ground early in the campaign. An A.C. Nielsen poll published on election day showed the Coalition on 52 per cent of the two-party preferred vote. A Newspoll taken over 7/8 November had the Government on 53 per cent. It also showed 52 per cent preferred Howard as Prime Minister with only 34 per cent opting for Beazley. According to a Newspoll survey taken over 4/5 November, 51 per cent believed Howard was best able to handle the economy compared to 30 per cent for Beazley. In terms of who was more capable of handling Australia's national security, Howard was ranked 20 per cent ahead of Beazley.¹¹

The last part of the campaign was marked by a confusing flurry of charge and counter charge. The Government claimed interest rates and petrol prices would rise under Labor. It also attacked Beazley over the cost of his policies and said Labor could not be trusted to hold the line on border protection. The Opposition ran hard on the GST, asserting that it would be increased and extended to cover all types of food if the Coalition was re-elected.

On the eve of the poll, doubts were raised about the accuracy of the Government's claim early in the campaign that asylum seekers had deliberately thrown their children overboard. The Government's credibility took a battering. Howard countered by releasing a report from the Navy that a newly-intercepted boat carrying illegal immigrants had been deliberately set on fire. Given the dynamics of the campaign, the renewed prominence of the boat people issue in the final days probably worked in the Coalition's favour.

On the whole, both sides ran competent campaigns that were largely mistake free and stayed 'on message'. Both leaders showed their professionalism as campaigners. Beazley hammered away at his health and education theme, making up ground and preventing what looked like a landslide defeat at the start of the campaign. Howard's switch to the domestic front for a final blitz in the last two weeks after exploiting the international situation for all it was worth was an effective strategy.

The Results

The Government was comfortably returned with 50.95 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, a swing towards it of 1.95 per cent.¹² The Liberal primary vote for the House of Representatives was 37.08 per cent, up 3.19 per cent, while the National Party's vote rose 0.32 per cent to 5.61 per cent (the Northern Territory

¹¹ *SMH*, 10.11.01; *Australian*, 7.11.01, 10.11.01.

¹² Results are from Australian Electoral Commission, *Electoral Newsfile*, Nos. 103 and 104, January 2002.

Country Liberal Party polled 0.32 per cent). The ALP's primary vote fell 2.26 per cent to 37.84 per cent, the worst result since 1931. The Democrat vote was relatively stable, 5.41 per cent compared to 5.13 per cent at the last election. The Greens had a substantial swing towards them, with the vote jumping 2.34 per cent to 4.96 per cent. It seems likely that most of this increase came from former ALP voters disaffected with the Party's support for the Government's border protection policy. Much of this came back to Labor as preferences. A strong flow of Green and Democrat preferences ensured that Labor's low primary vote became a more respectable 49.05 per cent on a two-party preferred basis. The vote for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party collapsed, down 4.09 per cent to 4.34 per cent. Many commentators argued that these voters were lured back to the Coalition by Howard's tough line on immigration. Another factor may have been that improved farm incomes resulting from a lower dollar had dissipated some of the hostility to the Government.

Table 4
House of Representatives:
percentage of first preference votes 2001 Federal Election

	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>ACT</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUS</i>
ALP	36.45	41.65	34.70	37.14	33.74	47.17	46.98	42.90	37.84
LP	33.58	39.07	36.46	41.39	45.90	37.10	32.39		37.08
NP	9.22	3.08	9.14	1.02					5.61
CLP								40.54	0.32
DEM	4.24	6.25	4.31	4.66	10.54	4.48	8.03	5.26	5.41
GRN	4.75	5.90	3.49		3.64	7.81	7.07	4.02	4.39
GWA				5.99					0.57
HAN	4.77	1.28	7.07	6.27	4.75	2.87	2.75	3.82	4.34
OTHER	6.98	2.77	4.84	3.53	0.97	0.57	0.68	3.45	4.45

Tasmania was the only State with a two-party preferred swing to Labor, 0.41 per cent. New South Wales recorded the largest pro-Government swing, 3.20 per cent. All other States also moved towards the Coalition but more modestly. The two-party preferred swing was 1.81 per cent in Queensland, 1.39 per cent in Victoria, 1.08 per cent in Western Australia and 0.97 per cent in South Australia.

In terms of seats, the only Labor gain was Ballarat in Victoria where the sitting Liberal was retiring. From Labor, the Liberals won Ryan and Dickson in Queensland and Canning in Western Australia. In New South Wales, the Liberal Party won Dobell and Paterson (an ALP seat made notionally Liberal by redistribution). Parramatta and Macarthur, which were notionally Labor after redistribution, were held by the Liberals. The Nationals lost Farrer, where former Party Leader Tim Fischer was retiring, to the Liberal Party. They also lost two seats

to high profile Independents. New England was won by Tony Windsor, MP for Tamworth in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, and National renegade Bob Katter easily held his Queensland seat of Kennedy. Allowing for the effects of redistribution and excluding the Ryan by-election, the Liberal Party increased its strength from 64 to 69 seats, the Nationals declined 3 to 13, Labor's numbers fell from 69 to 65, and 2 more Independents joined Peter Andren, who easily retained Calare in rural New South Wales. The Government thus has a majority of 14 or, more realistically, 16 if Katter and Windsor, who are both conservative Independents, are included.

Looking at overall trends, election analyst Antony Green commented:

the swing to the Government was larger in capital cities than in rural and regional Australia. This suggests the asylum seekers and defence issues did not completely overcome the earlier unrest against the Government in rural seats. The comfortable victories recorded by Peter Andren, Tony Windsor and Bob Katter back this view. The big swings tended to occur in safe Labor seats that did not fall, especially in Sydney's West.¹³

A reflection of the fact that swings to the Government were relatively modest in the marginals is that a uniform swing of just under 2 per cent would see it lose office.

The strong anti-Labor trend in New South Wales was the object of much comment. Many safe ALP seats in Sydney's West, the Illawarra and the Hunter showed two-party preferred swings to the Government in the range of 4 per cent to 7 per cent. The Liberal Party recorded two-party preferred votes of more than 55 per cent in mortgage belt seats such as Lindsay and Macarthur in outer Western Sydney, Hughes in Sydney's South and Robertson on the Central Coast.

One explanation put forward was that many Sydney voters had large mortgages and were thus more susceptible to Government claims that interest rates would rise under Labor. More generally, it was argued that the affluence of Sydney and its outskirts meant that:

some Labor policies, such as their GST rollback policies and the plan to cut funding for wealthier private schools, were likely to be less popular in Sydney than other parts of the country . . . higher than average incomes means Sydneysiders got a better deal from John Howard's trade-off tax cuts when the GST was introduced . . .¹⁴

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr commented:

I think Federal Labor has got to look at the impact of its policy stances in New South Wales. I think this is a State that's enjoyed economic buoyancy as a result of the influx of investment in information technology,

¹³ *SMH*, 12.11.01.

¹⁴ *SMH*, 17.11.01.

biotechnology, the finance sector. And some of Federal Labor's policy stances did not take account of the economic success in this State.¹⁵

It is also possible that the boat people issue was more potent in New South Wales as it absorbs the great majority of newly arrived migrants. Former New South Wales Labor Minister Rodney Cavalier observed that for many traditional ALP supporters 'the migrant experiment of the past 10 or 20 years has not worked.' These voters resented 'the presence of new arrivals in their midst — and any political party seen to support more arrivals.'¹⁶

Table 5
Senate: percentage of first preference votes 2001 Federal Election

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUS
LP			34.90	40.13	45.55	38.79	34.30		15.69
NP			9.16	2.35					1.92
LNP	41.76	39.61							23.88
CLP								43.71	0.35
ALP	33.50	36.79	31.73	34.15	33.24	36.84	42.02	39.22	34.33
DEM	6.21	7.82	6.69	5.86	12.62	4.62	10.74	7.30	7.25
GRN	4.36	5.99	3.31		3.45	13.79	7.22	4.27	4.38
GWA				5.86					0.56
HAN	5.58	2.45	10.02	7.03	4.56	3.29	2.18	4.68	5.54
OTHER	8.59	7.33	4.19	4.62	0.59	2.66	3.54	0.81	6.11

The election resulted in little variation in the Senate. Major party representation was unchanged with the Coalition returning 20 Senators and Labor 14. The ALP vote fell 2.97 per cent to 34.33 per cent, while the Coalition polled 41.84 per cent compared to 37.70 per cent in 1998. The Democrats lost one of their five Senators up for re-election, with Vicki Bourne being defeated by the Greens' Kerry Nettle in New South Wales. In spite of some pre-election speculation that he was in trouble, the other Greens Senator, Bob Brown, was returned comfortably in Tasmania. As in the House of Representatives, the Green vote was up substantially, from 2.72 per cent to 4.94 per cent. The Democrat vote fell 1.21 per cent to 7.25 per cent. The preference deal with the ALP helped the Democrats but some argued that this was at a cost to the Party's 'Keeping the bastards honest' image. One Nation founder Pauline Hanson's attempt to enter the Senate failed, the Party's national vote dropping from 8.99 per cent to 5.54 per cent. When the new Senators take their place in July, the numbers in the Senate will be: Coalition 35, ALP 28, Democrats 8, Greens 2, One Nation 1, Independents 2 (Tasmanians Brian Harradine and Shayne Murphy).

¹⁵ ABC, *PM*, <<http://www.abc.net.au/pm>> 2.11.01.

¹⁶ *SMH*, 17.11.01.

Conclusion

There would seem to have been three main factors behind the Government's victory. For whatever reasons, the boat people issue was extraordinarily emotive. The Government's firm stand struck a responsive chord with many voters and boosted Howard's image as a strong leader. Then came the traumatic 11 September terrorist attacks in the United States. The world order that had been taken for granted beforehand suddenly seemed threatened. In the resulting climate of uncertainty, the voters were looking for safety, stability and reassurance. It was a time for back to basics, not vision; consolidation, not experimentation. Howard was well placed to take advantage of this. He was seen by many as dependable and reliable — if not inspiring, at least a known quantity. The Government benefited greatly from the fact that immigration and terrorism became intertwined as the all pervasive context in which the campaign was fought.

A second reason that the Coalition was victorious was the economy. Many voters, particularly in the key marginal seats, were not inclined to jeopardise the existing economic situation, especially low interest rates, by experimenting with a change of government. Newspoll surveys from July to November 2001 consistently showed that Howard was rated far ahead of Beazley as a competent economic manager.¹⁷

Finally, the Opposition seemed to have a credibility problem. Many voters were unsure of what Beazley and Labor stood for. Hoping to coast to victory on the Government's failings, Labor had spent little time establishing itself as a viable alternative. Former ALP Federal Secretary Bob Hogg complained of

. . . the great flaw in Kim Beazley's five-year old strategy of hoping to win by holding back in establishing his and the ALP's credentials while relying on negative electoral reactions to the GST and its implementation, as well as the Government's ministerial bumbles and policy failures . . . By trying to emulate Howard's 1996 low-profile campaign [Beazley] made at least two cardinal errors. He assumed that Howard would become as unpopular as Paul Keating and that nothing unexpected would derail his campaign.¹⁸

Labor post-mortems also identified other problems. Opposition front-bencher Lindsay Tanner commented:

We have an enormous problem with the growing division in Labor's support-base between traditional working-class and educated middle-class voters. John Howard has exploited this division ruthlessly. Labor's failure at this election is partly attributable to its inability to hold together these increasingly divergent interests around a single political theme.¹⁹

¹⁷ <www.newspoll.com.au>.

¹⁸ *Australian Financial Review*, 8.10.01.

¹⁹ *Australian*, 13.11.01.

Others identified the stranglehold of the factions on the ALP as a problem, particularly in the selection of candidates. Rodney Cavalier said that the current system 'selects candidates from an ever-shrinking catchment of union officials, ministerial staffers and factional loyalists.'²⁰ Tanner spoke of the need to tackle

the chronic decay within our grassroots organisation. We have managed to struggle on with only limited reform of our organisation and processes for some time, but the decline of membership involvement is a serious problem. The existence of other alternatives is eating away at our activist base and our membership in many critical seats is threadbare. Without genuine reinvigoration we will soon begin to ossify.²¹

Would the Coalition have been victorious without the international situation and the immigration issue? While it will never be possible to give a definitive answer, the fact that the polls showed the Government was not in a winning position in early August and the relatively modest swing towards it at the election indicate that without the bounce it received from these issues the Coalition would have struggled to win. However, it must be emphasised that Howard had rebuilt his electoral base and was in a position to take advantage of fortuitous events that came his way. If this had not been the case, he could still have lost. As an example, at the New South Wales election of May 1941, the UAP/CP Coalition Government campaigned heavily on the need to avoid a change of government at a time of wartime crisis and was resoundingly defeated by Labor under W.J. McKell.

The only thing everyone seemed to agree on about the November 2001 election was that a new political landscape had emerged in its aftermath. But where was the future? In many ways it seemed to be in the past.

One of the main criticisms that has been levelled at John Howard during his term of office is that he is 'backward looking' and 'increasingly out of touch.' After 10 November, Howard became one of only five prime ministers to win a third consecutive election (or four if W M Hughes, who failed to retain the leadership of his Party after his final victory, is discounted). If he sees out most of his term he will become the third longest serving Australian prime minister. The swing to the Government was the largest to an incumbent since 1966. The electoral map shows the Liberal Party predominant in the key mortgage belt seats around most of the capital cities. Arguably, Howard's 'past' represents the electoral future.

For the Labor Party, the strategy that was most effective in its campaign was the belated emphasis on fundamental social issues such as health and education. A prominent theme in Labor post-mortems was the need for the Party to return to its traditional commitment to issues such as equality of opportunity and humanitarianism, values it had espoused since its formation.

²⁰ *SMH*, 17.11.01.

²¹ *Australian*, 13.11.01.

In the new political world of post-November 2001, is it a case of back to the future?

