

Australian election debate: Howard and Rudd compete as economic conservatives

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Last night's sole debate between Prime Minister John Howard and Labor leader Kevin Rudd was, in many ways, a microcosm of the entire official election campaign. The two major parties—Labor and Liberal—vied with each other over which would more effectively implement the next wave of pro-big business economic reform. No other parties or candidates were allowed to participate.

The so-called debate was held in the Great Hall of parliament house in Canberra, before a few hundred handpicked spectators—exactly half selected by Rudd and the other half by Howard. Even in this highly vetted forum, no-one in the audience was allowed to make a sound, let alone ask questions of the two contenders. At one point, after a few people could be heard laughing, the moderator, Sky News's David Speers, castigated them, insisting everyone remain silent.

The "debate" consisted of opening statements from Rudd and Howard, followed by responses from each. Then five representatives of the mainstream media, including Paul Kelly, political editor for Murdoch's *Australian*, and Laurie Oakes from the Packer family's Publishing and Broadcasting Limited, were allowed to ask one question of each of the candidates, as well as a follow-up. Then Howard and Rudd asked each other three questions. The whole tedious affair lasted 90 minutes.

Prior to the debate, Howard insisted that the "worm"—a feature of election debates over the past few years—would not be allowed during the broadcast. The worm is a moving line that appears at the bottom of the television screen, indicating the immediate collective responses of a live studio audience to what is being said. In the last two debates, the worm has been decisively anti-Howard.

Despite the prime ministerial "ban", Channel Nine decided to use the worm in its live coverage of the debate, monitoring the ongoing reactions of around 100 "swinging voters". But this, apparently, proved too much. Twice during the course of the event, Nine's video feed from the ABC was cut, amounting to an extraordinary act of censorship.

In the debate itself, not one of the most critical issues confronting ordinary people was discussed. From the outset it became a contest between Howard and Rudd over who could more rightfully claim the mantle of "economic conservative".

Howard took personal credit for Australia's recent economic growth—due, in fact, to the China-fuelled boom in resource and mineral prices and the explosion of private debt. The prime minister defended his government's pro-market record, and sought to whip up fears of higher interest rates under an "inexperienced" Rudd government. Perhaps sensing that this line of argument might not appeal to working people hit by five successive interest rate rises since the 2004 election, Howard appeared defensive and uncertain.

Rudd's central contention was that Howard had squandered the opportunities opened up by the resources boom and had failed to advance the necessary pro-business reforms. He boasted of his "economic conservative" credentials and stressed what he called "the history of great economic reform in this country in the period from '83 to '96, when this country's entire economic orientation was turned on its head".

Rudd was referring to the assault on the social position of the working class carried out by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, in the name of integrating the Australian economy into the global capitalist market. The "free market" measures introduced by Labor resulted in an unprecedented transfer of wealth from working people to the ultra-wealthy and generated immense anger and resentment, leading to Howard's landslide election victory in 1996.

That Rudd wholeheartedly embraces this legacy is a warning of the ruthless agenda he will implement, on behalf of corporate Australia, if Labor wins the election. Moreover, Rudd pointedly referred to the critical role played by the trade union bureaucracy in enforcing Hawke and Keating's policies, suggesting that the large number of former union officials in his leadership would do likewise.

In response, Howard also solidarised himself with the Hawke-Keating reforms, but insisted that Rudd Labor would not be up to the task of continuing them.

Rudd's attempts to appeal to the millions of workers under increasing financial pressure were a cynical fraud. He referred to the crisis in public health and education, but failed to explain why he had just matched Howard's election promise of a massive tax cut rather than allocating billions to critically needed public services. Under both the Liberal and Labor plans, the benefits will go overwhelmingly to the rich.

The Labor leader also tried to tap into widespread animosity to Howard's WorkChoices industrial relations legislation—questioning Howard over the fate of workers who are made redundant. Howard avoided answering, because under his new laws, such workers will have no right to redundancy pay. But again, Rudd failed to mention that his own industrial relations regime would also allow employers to forego redundancy payments in certain circumstances.

Despite overwhelming opposition to the Iraq war, the issue was first raised more than one hour into the debate, and then only in the context of whether it had increased the risk of terrorism. Rudd tried to distance himself from the war, not on the basis that it represented a massive war crime that had led to the destruction of Iraqi society and the deaths of more than a million people, but because it was a tactical error that has inflamed the terrorist threat to Australians.

The suppression of any genuine discussion on the eruption of US militarism and its driving impulse—the escalating great power rivalries now wracking every part of the globe—is one of the central features of the official election campaign. The debate did not even mention the word "Iran", despite evidence that both Howard and Rudd have already signed off on any

US-led attack on that country. Nor was the South Pacific raised, despite—or rather, because of, both parties’ commitment to Australia’s indefinite neo-colonial occupation of East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Rudd’s promise to withdraw Australian combat forces is another sham. The so-called staged withdrawal will affect just one-third of Australia’s total military commitment to Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and the troops involved will be redeployed to the other theatre in the same, illegal war: Afghanistan.

Stressing his full support for Australia’s alliance with US imperialism, Rudd ominously declared: “We will calibrate our decision [on Australian troops in Iraq] in consultation with the Americans and our allies about what happens not just in Iraq but in the wider region”.

Howard maintained his full support for the indefinite occupation of Iraq and warned of the dangerous consequences were “the prestige of the United States” to slip. He added that he “understands” that there are many people who

disagree with him and attacked Rudd’s hypocrisy on the issue, declaring: “The reality is Mr Rudd wants to convey an impression to the Australian public that he’s all against the involvement but wants to say to the Americans and others, ‘I’m not really, I’m only half against it’.”

This point was the one convincing moment of Howard’s performance.

The official debate confirmed that broad layers of working people, students, and youth have been effectively disenfranchised, with their interests and concerns finding no expression whatsoever in a political system monopolised by two parties of big business. The Socialist Equality Party is standing 13 candidates, in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, in order to advance the genuine, socialist alternative in the 2007 elections—against militarism and war, social inequality and the ongoing assault on basic democratic rights. We urge all those who agree with our program to support and participate in our campaign.

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