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BOATPEOPLE AND THE 2001 ELECTION

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In the wake of the Tampa incident in August 2001 the Coalition Government developed tougher policies on border control. Many commentators believe that this cost Labor the November 2001 election. The theory is that, even though Labor supported the new policies, the Coalition's stance was perceived to be more sincere and that this lured away some of Labor's working-class voters. At the same time, some new-class professionals who would normally have voted Labor were repelled by its support for the Coalition's policies and voted Green or Democrat.

Data collected by the 2001 Australian Election Study (AES) provide some confirmation for this theory, but they also point to a boarder shift in Australia's electoral politics. National identity was an election tissue in 1996 and again in 2001. On both occasions this worked well for the Coalition. The AES shows that people who feel close to Australia and are proud to be Australian are more likely to vote for the Coalition, while Labor draws a higher level of support from the minority of voters who have a more distant relationship with their country.

Australian politics are undergoing an odd change. Traditionally elections have been fought on economic lines, where the left (Labor) has challenged the right (the Liberal/National Party Coalition). In this challenge the term *left* meant intervention in the economy to protect weaker groups through regulation, state provision of welfare, and economic protectionism, while *right* meant a commitment to freer markets. But during the 1980s economic neo-liberalism gained ascendancy on both sides of politics and many of the old ways of intervening in the economy in Australia were wound back. These reforms were implemented by Labor Governments (in power from March 1983 to March 1996) and were naturally not opposed by the Liberal/National Party Opposition. The consequence was that both sides of politics converged on a quasi-bipartisan position on neo-liberalism.

But given this convergence how were they to differentiate themselves in electoral contests? Mainstream parties in Australia have been reluctant to move way from the old economic agenda to fight elections on, say, social questions like illicit drugs, capital punishment, euthanasia, abortion or

immigration.¹ The territory is unexplored. Parties could be internally divided and who knows how voting blocks might react. But it is hard to stick to the safe economic ground of the welfare state versus market forces when, in reality, the positions of both parties have become almost identical on these questions.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Labor Governments implemented their neo-liberal economic reforms but they also instituted a number of non-economic changes as they tried to reshape the way in which Australia presented itself to its citizens and the world. Writing in February 2001 Robert Manne put it like this:

Over the past quarter-century or so many Australians have been engaged in an attempt to reimagine their country and its place in the world. This reimagining has occurred on four main fronts: Australia as part of Asia; Australia as a multicultural society; Australia as a republic; Australia as a place where its indigenous and non-indigenous populations are reconciled. Although many of these hopes were born around the time of the Whitlam Government, or even before, it was only

really during the prime-ministership of Paul Keating that these four elements were brought together in a coherent program and began to dominate Australia's cultural debates.²

These attempts to refashion Australia's national image have been popular with Labor politicians and many public intellectuals but they have had less resonance with the Australian mainstream. Perhaps this is because they implicitly devalue the existing Australian nation and even, in some cases, erode its sense of having a distinctive and honourable identity of its own.³

In the last three Federal elections (March 1996, October 1998 and November 2001) questions of national identity played a key role in two (1996 and 2001), and in both instances this worked well for the Coalition. Led by John Howard, the Coalition campaigned in 1996 on the slogan 'For all of us', offering a half-stated promise to end structural multiculturalism and to rethink the goals of closer integration with Asia and Aboriginal separatism.⁴ While Keating attacked this slogan as coded racism, it in fact stood for a more positive image of traditional Australia. The 1996 campaign was a success and Howard won a decisive victory.⁵

In 1998 the Coalition built its campaign on economic grounds — the introduction of the new consumption tax (the Goods and Services Tax or GST) — and very nearly lost. But 2001 was similar to 1996. Once again questions of national identity were more to the fore than economics and the Coalition won with a safer margin than in 1998.

THE 2001 ELECTION

Though the Coalition won in 2001, it did this with the its fourth lowest primary vote since 1949. Labor, however, received its

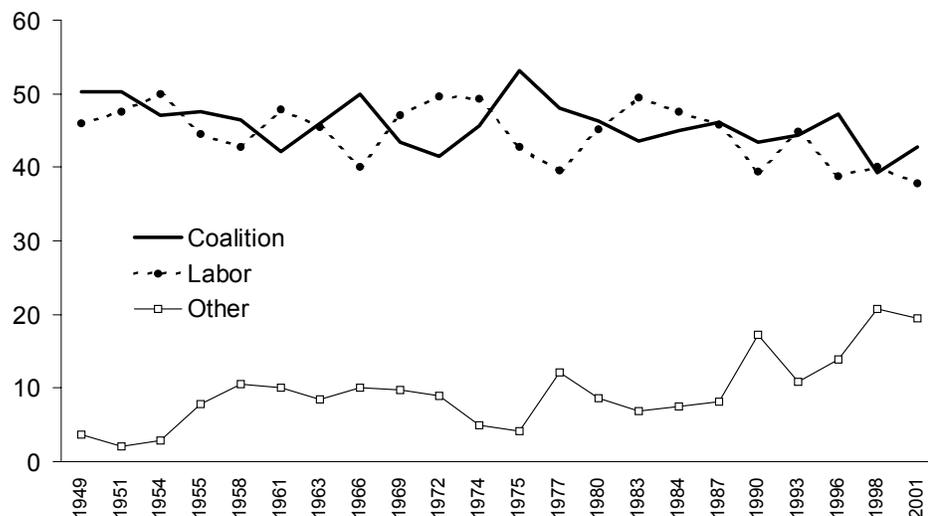
lowest proportion of the primary vote in the House of Representatives, not just since 1949, but since 1906. The Coalition's win is naturally the key feature of the election, but the low proportions of the vote gained by both Labor and the Coalition point to another feature, the steady drift to the minor parties since 1990. (See Figure 1.)

This drift can be explained by the major parties' de facto collaboration on economic questions. One Nation, for example, wanted to roll back neo-liberalism. It also openly challenged Labor on the question of national identity. This offered voters a clear alternative, while the Greens and the Democrats wanted to bring other questions such as the environment into the mainstream political debate and this too challenged the major parties' bipartisan economic consensus. But the drift has so far not prevented one of the major party groupings from gaining a majority of seats in the lower house and forming a Government.

In November 2001, the Coalition ended up with 51 per cent of the two-party preferred vote and began its third term in office. But earlier in 2001 such an outcome had looked quite unlikely. The Government's win in 1998 had been extraordinarily close and, as its second term developed, its popularity fell even further. In 1998 it went to the people promising a new tax, the GST. The promise was uninviting and, for many Australians, the reality also proved unpleasant.

The GST was implemented late in 2000; by early 2001 opinion polls showed widespread dissatisfaction and the Government seemed certain to lose the next election. Former Labor Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, claimed that Labor was set to win by a landslide.⁶ Yet despite

Figure 1: Primary vote in Federal elections 1949 to 2001, Coalition, Labor and other parties (per cent)



Source: 1949 to 1996, 1996 CDROM: *The Parliament Stack* (produced by the Parliamentary Education Office, with Interactive Media Pty Ltd., Canberra); 1998 and 2001, the Australian Electoral Commission, <http://www.aec.gov.au> (downloaded 7/7/2002)

the GST and the bad polls the Government was returned in 2001. Why?

The turnaround in its electoral fortunes is widely attributed to the Government's policies on asylum-seekers, particularly unvisaed boatpeople. What were these policies? In most respects the Coalition had simply continued policies developed by Labor in the early 1990s. For example, since 1992 it had been mandatory to hold boatpeople in detention centres while their refugee claims were assessed and to deport those whose claims were rejected. After its election in 1996 the Howard Government retained these policies.

But despite this firm regime the number of boat arrivals rose in the late 1990s.⁷ Most were from the Middle East or South Asia and were brought to Australian waters by people smugglers operating out of Indonesia. The smugglers usually took their clients either to Ashmore reef or Christmas Island, from which points

Australian authorities would collect them and bring them to the mainland for processing. It was this latter policy that the Government changed in dramatic circumstances late in August 2001, and it is this policy change which may have won them the election.

On 26 August a boat carrying asylum-seekers from Indonesia to Australia began to break up; at the eleventh hour the passengers were rescued by a Norwegian freighter, the *Tampa*.⁸ After an unsuccessful attempt to return the people to Indonesia the *Tampa* tried to bring them to Christmas Island. The Government denied the ship access to Australia waters but the captain persisted. Unlike most previous boat arrivals the people on the *Tampa* were now on a sea-worthy vessel and in no danger of drowning; the Government could afford to make an example of them without risk to human life. The Special

Air Service troops were sent in to take over the ship and most of the asylum-seekers were eventually taken to Nauru which agreed to shelter them (at Australia's expense) while their claims were processed.

The *Tampa* incident established a new principle. Boatloads of asylum-seekers were, if possible, to be kept away from Australian territory. Since that period the Australian navy has patrolled the sea routes from Indonesia and some boatloads of potential asylum-seekers have been turned back. Others have been taken to various small Pacific Island nations for processing, a policy known as the 'Pacific solution' and, as part of a suite of immigration laws passed in October 2001, Christmas Island and Ashmore reef were excised from the 'migration zone'. This means that, for purposes of migration law, these areas do not count as Australian territory. Now if an unvisaed person arrives at these islands, claims refugee status and is rejected they do not have access to the Australian legal system to press their case.⁹

The *Tampa* incident brought the question of border control into sharp relief and the Government acted with a degree of toughness and resolution which surprised most observers. This incident was followed by the September 11 tragedy in the United States and, before the November election campaign, the question of border control, defence and terrorism may well have merged in many people's minds.

The events surrounding the *Tampa* affair were not simply a background to the election, they played a strong role in the campaign. Howard reiterated his Government's resolve on border control saying: 'We will decide who comes to this country and in what circumstances'. Labor, led by Kim Beazley, did not chal-

lenge him on this, nor on the Pacific solution. Nevertheless, a number of commentators have attributed the Coalition's election win and Labor's defeat to the *Tampa* incident and to the new asylum-seeker policies set up in its wake.¹⁰

At one level this seems an odd conclusion. Labor endorsed mandatory detention and the refusal to allow the *Tampa* to enter Australian waters; it also backed the Pacific solution. Its asylum-seeker policy was identical to the Coalition's, so why should this question turn the tide for the Government? The answer lies in the suspicion voters may have harboured that Labor's heart was not in it. This suspicion may have its origins in Labor's ambitious attempts to reimagine the Australian identity while it was in office, and it could have been confirmed when Beazley blocked the Government's first efforts to pass a border protection bill on 28 August 2001.¹¹ Also, in the lead up to the election various Labor politicians, including Anthony Albanese and Senator Barney Cooney, deplored Labor's bipartisan position on border control. In Albanese's view it was White Australia (and the stolen generation) all over again.¹² Con Sciacca, Labor's immigration spokesman, took a different line. He said Labor had not caved in to the Government on border protection and that they would implement their own plan if they won. In the mean time, 'there's no point in us being seen as obstructionist. These are issues we will look at, but at the moment we don't run the immigration program'.¹³

Some voters could have thought Labor was backing Howard for instrumental reasons but would change the rules if they won. As one journalist wrote in October 2001, Labor was 'caught endorsing something the public rightly suspects they don't believe in'.¹⁴ In contrast, there could be no question that the Coalition were

determined and sincere.

Illicit drugs, euthanasia and other social questions concerned with personal morality have not become election issues in Australia, but the question of national identity has. And as this tendency has developed the political terms *left* and *right* have shifted. Two years ago I was surprised that an otherwise well-informed group of undergraduates could not tell me what the words meant. I was looking for the definition of collectivism versus open markets. But they had grown up under bipartisan neo-liberalism and this definition did not occur to them. Eventually one said, 'You're right-wing if you're a racist and want to bring back traditional family values and you're left-wing if you're against these things', and the rest of the class relaxed in relieved agreement.

It is not absurd for young people who see themselves as socially progressive to view the political spectrum in this way. The term *left-wing* is now often applied to programs for international social justice and human rights while the term *right-wing* is often applied (by the self-described left) to people who value the national community. And as we will see, attitudes to perceived racism are now crucial to the distinction between the two terms.

LABOR'S DIVIDED CONSTITUENCY

Labor has two main electoral constituencies. One consists of well-educated men and women who see themselves as socially progressive. It is they who support the moral values of international cosmopolitanism, social justice, anti-racism, multiculturalism, closer integration with Asia, and Aboriginal self-determination. Most of this group are members of the new class of university-educated professionals, concentrated in inner urban areas.¹⁵ The other constituency

is the old working class for whom the party was originally formed.

Questions such as welfare spending, health care and government support for education tend to unite the two groups, but immigration control is different. It is a heavily symbolic issue that lies at the heart of how we define the nation. Is Australia simply a place on the map inhabited by a collection of individuals with the luck to have access to decent resources and no real right to deny access to outsiders? Or is it a community built by its members, where people have obligations to each other and the right to preserve their hard won institutions?

The first constituency is prone to judge immigration, especially of asylum-seekers and other needy cases, in terms of universal human rights and to despise others who resist this perspective; the second constituency is more likely to see support for the rights of unauthorised arrivals as a denigration of their own right to maintain their nation as they wish. Debate about immigration control necessarily includes pragmatic matters such as disruption of neighbourhoods and competition for jobs and welfare, but it also highlights the symbolic question of how the two constituencies imagine the Australian community and, indeed, of how they imagine each other. It is the symbolic link between immigration control and national identity that gives the former its political significance.

During the 1980s Labor seemed to be abandoning its old constituency on economic questions while at the same time increasing its commitment to the moral agenda favored by the new-class. It was then that the meanings of the terms *left* and *right* shifted. Today people who describe themselves as left-wing are more likely to be talking about international social justice and the struggle against racism than about economic support for their less well-off fellow citizens. Indeed, attitudes to race have become so central to the division between left and right that my student's definition of the two terms is scarcely a caricature. In the eyes of many people who see themselves as left-wing, politics are almost reduced to the 'anti-racist left' versus the 'racist right'.¹⁶

The traditional Australian worker is sidelined in this discourse. The left-leaning sections of the new class ostensibly care about economic protection, welfare and solidarity with the Australian poor but these values lack moral urgency to them beside the new crusades for racial equality and international human rights.

The fact that Labor has two different main constituencies is the source both of its enthusiasm for reimagining Australia and of its ambivalence on border control. For the traditional Labor voter border control can symbolise respect for the national community and for the bonds between its existing members. But for the new class professionals it can mean racial exclusiveness and a selfish refusal to share our good fortune with desperate and deserving outsiders.¹⁷

It was unfortunate for Labor that border control became an election issue in 2001. In effect, it was forced to choose between the sharply divergent preferences of its two constituencies. It endorsed Howard's policies because, in the end, there were more votes at stake from the traditional

constituency than there were among the inner-urban professionals. But it ended up with a compromise that risked pleasing neither: a position on border control that may not have sounded tough enough to convince the workers, but which was quite tough enough to alienate the new class.

Labor's difficulties were compounded by two of the minor parties: the Democrats and the Greens. Neither of these parties felt any need to court votes from Australians anxious about the integrity of their nation and both condemned Howard's asylum-seeker policies. The Greens made their distaste for these policies especially clear. If voters were strongly repelled by the major parties' shared position on asylum-seekers, they did have an electoral alternative; the joint vote of the Democrats and Greens rose from 7.27 per cent in 1998 to 10.37 per cent in 2001 and most of this increase was due to a rise in the vote for the Greens.

The third minor party, One Nation, was in a different situation. Howard's policy was just as tough as anything they had ever proposed. It left them with no room to stake out a distinctive position and their primary vote fell from 8.43 per cent in 1998 to 4.34 per cent in 2001.

Labor's loss and the Coalition's win has been explained by the following two-part theory.¹⁸ First, many workers left the Labor Party for the Coalition because they believed the Coalition to be more sincere on border control and, second, the left-leaning sections of the new class left them for the Greens, or the Democrats, because they were repelled by the bipartisan policy in any form. This may have happened and it may have happened to a large enough extent to affect the outcome of the election. But there is a broader possibility behind this specific hypothesis. Perhaps many voters either stayed with the Coalition or moved to it because they were

attracted to the Coalition's positive view of the nation's identity.

EXPLAINING THE VOTE

In April 2002 the 2001 Australian Election Study (AES)¹⁹ became available and it is possible to turn to survey evidence to try to find some answers to these questions. Like earlier Australian Election Studies the 2001 AES is based on a self-administered questionnaire, in this case one posted to a random sample of 4000 voters immediately after the election. Eventually 2010 completed questionnaires were received (a response rate of 50.25 per cent). How well does the survey represent the population of all voters in Australia? Table 1 shows that it is very close to the actual proportions of Labor, Democrat and One Nation voters, but that it tends to over-represent Liberal and Green voters, and slightly under-represents people who voted for the National Party and other parties.

People who respond to a multi-page questionnaire may differ from the general

population, more so than people who respond to a brief telephone poll. For example, they are more likely to be literate in English and well educated. Using such a method to predict election results would be risky but, even though Liberal voters are over-represented, we can use the 2001 AES to explore two questions: the broad question of whether feelings about national identity help explain the election outcome, and the more specific question concerning attitudes to the nominally bipartisan asylum-seeker policy. Were former Labor voters dissatisfied with Labor's contribution to this policy and did they take their vote elsewhere in consequence, and were current Coalition voters were happy with it?

Vote switching

To begin with the specific question. The first point to clarify is who changed their vote between 1998 and 2001. Table 2 sets out the vote in the House of Representatives in 2001 by the respondent's vote in the House of Representatives in 1998, as recollected for the 2001 AES. It shows that the Coalition held onto its 1998 voters rather better than Labor. But there was no large switch from Labor to the Coalition; just over seven per cent of 1998 Labor voters did move in that direction but they were balanced by an equivalent proportion of former Liberal Party voters moving to Labor. (People who had voted for One Nation in 1998 did shift disproportionately to the Coalition, but the numbers of former minor-party supporters in the sample are all rather small.)

The data in Table 2 do not contradict the hypothesis that Labor may have lost voters to the Coalition in 2001 because of border control, even though it gained an equivalent proportion from the Liberals. (The disenchanted ex-Liberals may have swung to Labor for other reasons.) And

Table 1: Vote in House of Representatives, 10 November 2001 (per cent)

	Actual vote	AES sample
Liberal	37.08	42
National	5.61	4
(Coalition)	(42.69)	(46)
Labor	37.84	37
Democrats	5.41	5
Greens	4.96	5
One Nation	4.34	4
Other	4.77	2
Total	100	100
Total (number)	11,474,093	1,826

Sources: Australian Electoral Commission web site (www.aec.gov.au) and the 2001 AES file (see endnote 19)

Note: Both totals exclude people who voted informal and, in the case of the AES, the total excludes those who did not answer the question on voting. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Table 2: Vote in the House of Representatives in 2001 by vote in 1998 (per cent)

	Vote in House of Representatives in 1998								
	Liberal	Labor	National	Democrats	Greens	One Nation	Other	Did not vote in 1998	Total
Liberal	83	7	18	19	12	27	26	37	42
National	3	0.3	69	1	2	6	5	2	4
Coalition	85	7	87	20	14	33	32	39	46
Labor	7	80	3	19	21	11	8	42	38
Democrats	3	5	3	42	9	3	3	4	6
Greens	2	6	2	15	54	2	11	7	5
Democrats & Greens	5	11	5	57	63	5	13	11	12
One Nation	1	1	2	1	0	49	18	6	4
Other	2	1	3	3	2	2	29	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total (number)	765	705	61	69	43	63	38	82	1,826

Source: AES 2001

Note: Excludes those who did not answer one or both questions on voting and those who said that in 2001 they either voted informal or did not vote (n=23). Totals may not add to subtotals exactly, or to 100, because of rounding.

Labor certainly lost voters to the minor parties. Eleven per cent of former Labor voters switched to either the Democrats or the Greens, compared to only five per cent of former Liberal or National Party voters. (One Nation picked up very few voters from either Labor or Liberal; in this election a switch from the major parties to the minor parties virtually means a switch to the Democrats or the Greens.)

Asylum seekers and voter opinion

But did voters care about the asylum-seeker question? Earlier polls on boat arrivals and detention show strong support for the Government's policy, particularly among Coalition voters: for example, in October 2001 56 per cent of respondents thought that boatpeople should be turned back, rising to 65 per cent among Coalition supporters.²⁰ Did such opinions correlate with people's voting behaviour in 2001?

The 2001 AES asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: 'All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back'. This is a strong statement but, overall, it was supported by 62 per cent. Table 3 shows that a majority of those who agreed with it voted for the Coalition. It also shows that the vote for the minor parties was much higher among those who disagreed than it was in the sample as a whole, but that the Labor Party was disproportionately attractive to this group as well.

What about the vote switchers? Table 4 shows that former Liberal voters who disagreed with the asylum-seekers policy were very likely to vote Democrat or Green in 2001 but that overall their numbers are small (25 out of the 132 former Liberal voters in the sample, or 19 per cent). More than half of the ex-Liberal voters (74 of the 132 or 56 per cent)

Table 3: Vote in House of Representatives in 2001 by 'all boats carrying asylum-seekers should be turned back' (per cent)

	Strongly agree and agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree and strongly disagree	Total
Coalition	55	40	23	46
Labor	31	43	47	36
Other	14	17	31	18
Total	100	100	100	100
Total (no.)	1,150	326	373	1,849

Source: 2001 AES

Note: Excludes people who did not answer one or both of the questions and totals may not add to 100 because of rounding

Table 4: People who voted Liberal in the House of Representatives in 1998 but not in 2001; their vote in 2001 by attitudes to asylum seekers being turned back (per cent)

	Strongly agree and agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree and strongly disagree	Total
National	22	12	8	17
Labor	38	55	16	38
Democrat or Greens	18	27	60	28
One	12	3	4	8
Other	11	3	12	9
Total	100	100	100	100
Total (no.)	74	33	25	132

Source: 2001 AES

Table 5: People who voted Labor in the House of Representatives in 1998 but not in 2001; their vote in the House of Representatives 2001 by attitudes to asylum seekers being turned back (per cent)

	Strongly agree and agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree and strongly disagree	Total
Coalition	56	42	12	35
Democrats or Greens	27	58	79	54
One Nation	12	0	2	6
Other	5	0	7	5
Total	100	100	100	100
Total (no.)	59	19	58	136

Source: 2001 AES

actually agreed with the asylum-seeker policy. This figure, together with the 25 per cent who were neutral on the question, suggests that most ex-Liberal voters changed their vote for reasons other than the asylum-seeker policy. (If they had wanted an even tougher policy they could have gone to One Nation; if they had wanted more of an open-door policy they could have gone to the Democrats or Greens. As it was most [55 per cent] went to Labor or Nationals. Indeed the 17 per cent of ex-Liberals who switched to the National Party are only nominally vote-switchers because they did not withdraw their allegiance from the Government as a whole.)

But the specific hypothesis is about ex-Labor voters, not ex-Liberals, and Table 5 does offer it some support. A majority of the former Labor Party voters who supported the asylum-seeker policy did vote for the Coalition; if the One Nation vote is added to the Coalition's, 68 per cent of this subgroup switched to a party with a tough asylum-seeker policy. In contrast, a large majority of those who disagreed with the asylum-seeker policy did vote for the Democrats or Greens. The numbers involved are small but the difference between the disapprovers who voted Democrat or Green and the approvers who also voted Democrat or Green is statistically significant, as is the difference between the approvers and the disapprovers who voted for the Coalition.²¹

Table 4 suggests that most ex-Liberals were not particularly concerned with border control and changed their vote for other reasons. But even though the numbers of former Liberal voters who were unhappy with

the asylum-seeker policy is very small, the proportion of this sub-group who voted Democrat or Green is substantial (60 per cent) and it is statistically significant.²²

OCCUPATION AND ATTITUDES TO BOATPEOPLE

What about the idea of Labor's two different constituencies — the old working class versus the new-class socially progressive professionals? The AES has data which allow us to see whether people in different occupations had divergent views on asylum-seeker policy. It classifies occupations according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Table 6 shows attitudes to boatpeople by occupation, with occupation divided into the nine major ASCO groupings. However, one of the major groupings — professionals — has been broken into two sub-sections: social

professionals and other professionals. The social professionals include all teachers (from primary to tertiary), journalists and other media professionals, lawyers, ministers of religion, counsellors, social workers and people working in the arts. They are singled out here because Labor's socially progressive new-class constituency is likely to be concentrated in this sub-group.

Table 6 shows that over 62 per cent of the sample support the Government's asylum-seeker policy. It also shows that people working in trades, or as production and transport workers, were particularly in favour, while those working in the professions were much less in favour. Indeed among social professionals half disagreed with the policy, more than twice the proportion in the sample as a whole, and only a third agreed with it. The attitudes of the social professionals are quite unlike those of the rest of the sample.

Table 6: 'All boats carrying asylum-seekers should be turned back', by occupational group (per cent)

	Strongly agree & agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree & disagree	Total	Total (Number)
Managers and administrators	61	16	23	100	225
Social professionals	32	18	50	100	170
Other professionals	51	16	34	100	181
Associate professionals	64	17	19	100	182
Advanced clerical and service workers	64	24	13	100	80
Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers	68	20	12	100	273
Trades	72	17	12	100	174
Intermediate production and transport workers	75	13	12	100	132
Elementary clerical, sales and service workers	65	16	19	100	133
Labourers	65	22	13	100	152
Total	62	18	21	100	1702

Source: AES 2001

Note: Occupation is coded according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations, second edition, ABS 1997 (Catalogue No. 1220.0).

Occupation refers to people's current job or, if unemployed or retired, to their last regular paid job.

Table 6 excludes people who have never had a paid job or who did not answer the question on occupation. Totals may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Many of the individuals who have come out in public to condemn the policy come from this group. Some others coming from the group labelled 'other professionals', which includes health professionals, natural scientists, and business professionals (such as accountants, marketing people and human-relations officers). In contrast, among all other occupational groups more than 60 per cent support the policy.

Voting and class

The old political terms of *left* and *right* assumed that politics had a class basis and that working-class people would follow their economic interests and vote Labor, while middle- and upper-class people would vote non-Labor for the same reason. But the terms *left* and *right* have shifted and Labor is also focusing on a new constituency among non-working class people, particularly among the new class of university-educated professionals. Are these changes associated with changes in voting behaviour?

Here I am following Chris Chamberlain's definition of social class which is based on occupation and the degree of autonomy that workers enjoy in the workplace.²³ Of the occupations shown in Table 6 managers and administrators, professionals, associate professionals, and advanced and intermediate clerks are classified as middle to upper class while tradespeople, elementary clerks, intermediate production and transport workers, and labourers are classified as working class. Chamberlain does not discuss the new class but it would hover around the edges of his middle and upper-middle class, and can include some managers and administrators as well as professionals.²⁴

The ASCO system of classification changed in mid 1996²⁵ and this change makes it harder to develop a time series of

voting behaviour by social class. The working class in Table 7 includes tradespersons, plant and machine operators, drivers, and labourers from 1984 to 1993. From 1996 to 2001 it includes tradespersons, elementary clerks, sales and service workers, intermediate production and transport workers, and labourers. A key feature of the reclassification in mid 1996 was that the eight major occupational groups were increased to nine as two old groups (clerks plus sales and personal service workers) were rearranged into three new groups. These new groups were: advanced clerical and service workers; intermediate clerical, sales and service workers; and elementary clerical, sales and service workers. This rearrangement allows low-skilled, low autonomy clerical, sales and service workers to be separated out. Following Chamberlain's definition of class, they belong in his 'working-class' category.

The addition of elementary clerks to the 'working class' cannot, however, explain the dramatic increase in the working-class vote for the Coalition in 1996. If the elementary clerks are excluded there is a vote of 46.3 per cent for the Coalition among the working class in 1996. If they are included (as they are in Table 7) this vote only rises to 47.7 per cent.

The Coalition's victory in March 1996 was remarkable in that, as far we know, for the first time more working-class people voted for the Coalition than for Labor.²⁶ Did the 2001 election repeat this pattern? If the asylum-seeker question was a very divisive issue for Labor voters this might have happened.

Table 7 shows the low point for the Labor Party among working class voters in 1996 but it also shows that Labor managed to regain seven per cent of this vote in 1998 and that, in 2001, its share of the working class vote did not fall. Indeed it

rose slightly.²⁷ But while the Coalition did not match its 1996 feat in 2001 it more than kept the share of the working class vote that it had retained in 1998.

Overall, however, during the 17 years documented by the AES, Labor's share of the working class vote has fallen sharply, from two thirds in 1984 to less than a half in 2001. Some (around 10 per cent) have moved to the Coalition while the rest have moved to the minor parties. In contrast, Table 8 shows that the Coalition has managed to keep its share of the middle and upper class vote. This share was never as high as Labor's share of the working class vote, but it has remained relatively constant. The part of the middle and upper class vote that has drifted away to the minor parties appears to have come from the proportion of this group who used to vote Labor.

Not all of the commentators on the 2001 election subscribe to the two-part hypothesis (workers moving from Labor to the Coalition and new-class professionals from Labor to the Greens and the Democrats). Andrew Scott, for example, uses electoral data and information about the socio-economic status of electorates to argue that Labor held the working-class vote (or, in his terms, the 'blue-collar' vote) from 1998 to 2001.²⁸ His conclusion is echoed by this analysis of the AES data but it misses the long-term shift away from Labor among working class people since 1984. It is also silent on something else: the long term shift away from manual work, and repetitive low-autonomy white-collar work, to more highly skilled work.

Labor's traditional constituency is shrinking, not just because some traditional voters are alienated by the party's change in focus but because the proportion of the workforce in traditional working-class occupations is also

Table 7: The working class vote 1984 to 2001 (per cent)

Election	Coalition	Labor	Other	Total	Total number
1984	26	66	7	100	495
1987	29	64	7	100	497
1990	36	50	15	100	560
1993	34	61	5	100	817
1996	48	39	14	100	600
1998	36	46	18	100	574
2001	38	47	16	100	559

Sources: AES 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2001. See endnote 26.

Note: 1984 data are as recollected in 1987. See text for definition of 'working class'.

Table 8: The middle and upper class vote 1984 to 2001 (per cent)

Election	Coalition	Labor	Other	Total	Total number
1984	45	47	8	100	994
1987	49	43	8	100	995
1990	47	35	18	100	1,155
1993	52	40	8	100	1,665
1996	55	34	12	100	919
1998	48	35	17	100	994
2001	50	30	20	100	1,074

Sources: See Table 7.

Note: 1984 data are as recollected in 1987. See text for definition of 'middle and upper class'.

shrinking. A time series of workforce data by occupation can be assembled from the ABS labour-force surveys, but this task is complicated by the change to the system of classifying occupations noted above. Tables 9A and 9B set out data on the employed workforce by occupation from May 1987 to May 2002, with the two tables marking the break between the two systems of classification. If 1996 is compared with 1997 it is clear that, as well as the introducing the new three-part way of classifying clerks and service workers, the switch to the new system shrank the ranks of those labelled managers and administrators and increased that of those

Table 9A: Employed persons, major occupation groups, May 1987 to May 1996 (per cent)

	1987	1991	1996
Managers and administrators	11.1	11.1	10.6
Professionals	12.4	13.2	14.1
Para-professionals	5.9	5.9	5.8
Clerks	17.5	17.3	16.3
Salespersons and personal service workers	13.6	14.8	17.3
Tradespersons	15.9	15.0	14.3
Plant and machine operators, and drivers	7.9	7.4	6.8
Labourers and related workers	15.6	15.3	14.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total (number '000s)	7,103.6	7,738.9	8,337.1

Source: *The Labour Force*, Australia, May, ABS, Canberra, Cat. no. 6203.0, various years

Note: Occupations are coded according to the first edition of the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations 1987.

Table 9B: Employed persons, major occupation groups, May 1997 to May 2002 (per cent)

	1997	2000	2002
Managers and administrators	7.6	7.0	7.7
Professionals	17.1	18.2	18.8
Associate professionals	10.9	11.2	11.7
Advanced clerical and service workers	4.5	4.3	4.3
Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers	16.7	17.5	17.1
Tradespersons and related workers	13.7	13.3	12.8
Elementary clerical, sales and service workers	9.2	9.7	9.8
Intermediate production and transport workers	10.4	8.9	8.5
Labourers and related workers	10.0	9.7	9.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total (number '000s)	8,389.3	9,016.4	9,283.9

Source: *The Labour Force*, Australia, May, ABS, Canberra, Cat. no. 6203.0, various years

Note: Occupations are coded according to the second edition of the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations, 1997.

labelled professionals. While the re-classification complicates analysis, the two tables nonetheless show that the proportions of the employed workforce who can be classified as working class

according to Chamberlain's model are shrinking. (These are tradespersons, plant and machine operators and drivers, and labourers and related workers in Table 9A, and tradespersons, elementary clerical,

sales and service workers, intermediate production and transport workers, and labourers in Table 9B.)

In contrast both tables show a small but steady increase in the proportion of employed people who are professionals, while Table 9B shows that between 1997 and 2002 the proportion of managers and administrators remained stable but that of associate professionals grew slightly. The proportion of intermediate clerks also rose slightly during the same period. But from 1997 to 2002 no working-class occupation increased its proportionate share of the employed workforce; all of them decreased, except for the elementary clerks whose situation remained stable.

Table 4 is consistent with the hypothesis that working-class Labor voters who wanted a tough asylum-seekers policy left Labor for the Coalition while new-class professionals who were repelled by such a policy shifted to the Greens and Democrats. When we look at the occupational background of the people who actually made these shifts does this idea still hold up? As the analysis homes in on more and more specific groups the numbers in the AES become quite small. Consequently Tables 10 and 11 show raw numbers rather than percentages.

Table 11 shows that 70 per cent of the voters who left Labor for the Democrats or Greens were dissatisfied with the asylum-seeker policy (46 out of 70) and that a substantial proportion of this group were either managers and administrators or professionals (31 out of 70 or 44 per cent). Only seven people (or 10 per cent) among this group were in working-class occupations.

Table 10 shows that nearly 73 per cent of the voters who left Labor for the Coalition were satisfied with the asylum-seeker policy (32 out of 44) but that many of them, 19 (or 43 per cent) were not

in working class occupations.

The change in the ASCO system brings into relief a new middling group, the associate professionals and people doing advanced or intermediate work in offices, services and sales. Much of the media analysis of Labor's loss in 2001 has been in terms of its two divided constituencies, presented in the guise of working-class battler versus the new-class intellectual. But this is too simple. Table 9B shows that in May 2002 one third of the employed workforce worked in middling occupations which cannot be classed as either battlers or intellectuals. And as Table 12 shows, many of this middling group of associate professionals and advanced and intermediate clerks are Coalition voters.

How does this middling group see questions of national identity? The 2001 AES has two questions which bear on this topic: 'How close — how emotionally attached — do you feel to Australia?' and 'How proud are you to be Australian?'

Table 13 shows that overall most Australians feel very close to their nation and are very proud to be Australian. While a sense of closeness is highest among managers and administrators, the group where this feeling is next highest is among the middling group of associate professionals, advanced clerks, and intermediate clerks. When it comes to pride in Australia this middling group is the most likely to be very proud (and the social professionals the least likely). The differences in these sentiments by occupation are there, but they are not large. However a sense of closeness to, and pride in, Australia are clearly associated with voting behaviour. Table 14 shows that people who feel these emotions most strongly are more likely to vote for the Coalition while those who do not are

Table 10: Attitudes to asylum-seekers being turned back by occupational background, people who voted Labor in 1998 and Coalition in 2001 (numbers)

	Agree and strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree and strongly disagree	Total
Managers, administrators and professionals	8	1	3	12
Associate professionals, advanced and intermediate clerks	11	2	0	13
Tradespersons, intermediate production etc., elementary clerks, and labourers	13	4	2	19
Total	32	7	5	44

Source: AES 2001

Table 11: Attitudes to asylum-seekers being turned back by occupational background: people who voted Labor in 1998 and Democrat or Green in 2001 (numbers)

	Agree and strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree and strongly disagree	Total
Managers, administrators and professionals	4	3	31	38
Associate professionals, advanced and intermediate clerks	5	4	8	17
Tradespersons, intermediate production etc., elementary clerks, and labourers	5	3	7	15
Total	14	10	46	70

Source: AES 2001

Table 12: Vote in House of Representatives in 2001 by occupation (per cent)

	Coalition	Labor	Other	Total	Total (number)
Managers and administrators	63	25	13	100	216
Social professionals	32	35	33	100	167
Other professionals	50	29	21	100	176
Associate professionals	49	34	17	100	170
Advanced clerks	68	22	11	100	74
Intermediate clerks	49	33	19	100	259
Tradespersons	45	41	15	100	164
Intermediate production and transport workers	35	51	14	100	118
Elementary clerks	40	46	14	100	127
Labourers	33	53	13	100	141
Total	46	36	17	100	1,612

Source: AES 2001

more likely to vote for Labor or for the minor parties.

Table 6 on attitudes to asylum-seekers by occupation shows how unrepresentative the vocal social professionals are of most

other voters; it is not just that they do not speak for the working class, they also do not speak for a majority in any other occupational group. Table 15 shows voters' feelings about election issues by

Table 13: Closeness to Australia and pride in Australia by occupation, grouped (per cent)

	Managers and administrators	Social professionals	Other professionals	Associate professionals, advanced and intermediate clerks	Tradespersons, intermediate production etc., elementary clerks, and labourers	Total
How close — emotionally attached — do you feel to Australia?						
Very close	76	70	72	75	71	73
Close	23	27	25	22	27	24
Not very close or not close at all	1	4	3	3	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total (number)	227	169	181	536	591	1704
How proud are you to be Australian?						
Very proud	75	69	70	78	76	75
Quite proud	22	24	26	18	21	21
Not very or not at all proud	4	8	4	4	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total (number)	224	169	183	533	593	1702

Source: AES 2001

Table 14: Vote by feelings of closeness to Australia and by pride in Australia (per cent)

	Very close	Close	Not very close or not close at all	Total
Coalition	50	38	17	46
Labor	35	42	60	37
Other	15	20	23	17
Total	100	100	100	100
Total (number)	1343	436	48	1827
	Very proud	Quite proud	Not very or not at all proud	Total
Coalition	51	34	12	46
Labor	35	44	48	37
Other	14	21	39	17
Total	100	100	100	100
Total (number)	1381	380	66	1827

Source: AES 2001

voting patterns. The election issues can be roughly divided between economically-oriented political issues

such as health, welfare, employment and taxation, and newer questions which are more about long-term social and political

values than immediate economic outcomes: asylum-seekers, immigration, defence, terrorism and the environment. All of these newer questions concern the integrity of the nation (although environmentalists do not often express the latter in this light).

Table 15 shows that the Coalition tended to hold best that section of the electorate who put asylum-seekers, immigration, defence and terrorism higher on their list of important questions while Labor tended to hold people best if they put the older economic and welfare issues high on their list. (Neither of the major parties captures those who rank the environment as an issue of first or second importance; these voters go to the minor parties.) Table 15 also shows that people who stayed with Labor were less likely to rank asylum-seekers highly as an election issue while those who stayed with the Coalition ranked this question very highly — equal first with health and Medicare.

Coalition voters were also likely to be more concerned with defence, terrorism and immigration than were any other grouping.

All of these questions — asylum-seekers, defence and national security, terrorism, and immigration — bear on the integrity of the nation, both at the symbolic level and in reality. The concern that Coalition voters show for them suggests that as long as Australia's traditional national identity is an election issue the Coalition will have an advantage. In contrast, Labor will do best if elections focus on the older political questions of economics and welfare. The people who stayed with them in 2001 care about these questions and these questions do not divide its two main constituents nor prompt voters to desert Labor for other parties.

CONCLUSION

During the 1980s and early 1990s Labor took the new-class position on a range of

Table 15: The two most important issues during election by vote, people who voted Coalition or Labor in 2001, and people who had done so in 1998 but not in 2001 and issues ranked for sample as a whole (per cent)

	Whole sample	Coalition voters	ex-Coalition voters	Labor voters	ex-Labor voters	People who voted other
Health and Medicare	18	16	17	21	17	15
Education	16	12	19	20	21	21
Refugees and asylum seekers	13	16	11	8	13	14
Taxation	12	15	14	11	9	8
GST	11	7	13	16	9	9
Immigration	6	7	5	5	4	5
Defence and national security	6	9	6	3	2	4
Terrorism	5	7	2	4	3	2
The environment	5	3	6	3	9	13
Unemployment	5	4	4	6	7	5
Industrial relations	2	2	1	2	1	2
Worker entitlements	1	1	1	2	3	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total number of responses	3,433	1,593	283	1,273	260	567

Source: AES 2001

Note: The unit of analysis is responses not people

questions, particularly those concerning internationalism and human rights. But in that period economic questions still dominated electoral politics and these new questions were not put to the people. Now that the nature of Australia's identity has become an election issue we can see that Labor's attempt to reimagine this identity did not work well for the party. In contrast, the Coalition is staking out a position on national identity which is more in tune with the feelings of many voters.

The Coalition's position is particularly likely to appeal to the large and growing section of the electorate in semi-professional or skilled clerical and service work. This group accounts for a third of the employed workforce. It has not been singled out for attention in current analyses of the 2001 election but it is large enough to influence election outcomes. The people who comprise it tend to vote for the Coalition and to have a slightly higher level of attachment to the idea of Australia than most other groups. However, the main finding of this paper is that attachment to Australia is high across all occupational groups and that the Coalition is doing well because it has been able to tap into this emotion. In contrast, Labor's history of efforts to redefine the nation only resonated with a small section of Australians and worked against it first in the 1996 election and again in 2001.

References

- ¹ See I. McAllister, 'Immigration, bipartisanship and public opinion', in J. Jupp and M. Kabala (Eds), *The Politics of Australian Immigration*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993pp. 161-162.
- ² R. Manne, 'Centenary with nothing memorable to say', *Sydney Morning Herald: News And Features Section*, 5 February 2001
- ³ See K. Betts, *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, Chapters 3, 6 and 11; K. Betts, 'The cosmopolitan social agenda and the referendum on the republic', *People and Place*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1999, pp. 32-41.
- ⁴ See P. Williams, *The Victory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997. She writes that prior to the election Liberal research showed that people felt that 'We have government by minorities now. The silent majority are ignored', p. 52. See also *ibid.* pp. 172-177, 330-334 and K. Betts, 'Patriotism, immigration and the 1996 election', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1996, pp. 27-38.

- ⁵ See Williams op. cit., p. 250.
- ⁶ Quoted in M. Schubert, 'Sunk by Tampa "stumble"', *The Australian*, 10-11 August 2002, p. 7
- ⁷ See K. Betts, 'Boatpeople and public opinion in Australia', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 34-48.
- ⁸ For an account of the Tampa incident see *ibid*, pp. 38-40.
- ⁹ There are no processing facilities on Ashmore reef; but if boatpeople were to disembark there now they could be transferred to Christmas Island where a large facility is being built.
- ¹⁰ See B. Lagan, 'Once were Labor', *The Bulletin*, 9 April 2002, pp. 34-36; Martin Ferguson quoted in B. Haslem, 'Labor "wrong" to lecture on rights', *The Australian*, 17 December 2001, p. 2; G. Rundle, 'Middle-class malaise at heart of ALP loss', *The Canberra Times*, 13 November 2001.
- ¹¹ See Betts 2001 op. cit., p. 39.
- ¹² Albanese and Cooney are quoted in M. Secombe and A. Clennell, 'White Australia Policy revisited, says Labor MP', *www.australianpolitics.com*, 19 September 2001 (accessed 8/7/02).
- ¹³ Sciacca is quoted in *ibid*.
- ¹⁴ G. Megalogenis, 'Election 2001: What's the big issue? #1 Border protection', *The Australian*, 6-7 October 2001, p. 4
- ¹⁵ See Betts, *The Great Divide*, 1999, op. cit.; P. Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 20, 32; Noel Pearson calls them 'the intellectual middle stratum: journalists, academics, politicised clergy, politically active medical doctors, party careerists, writers, musicians, actors, cartoonists and other inner-city dwellers with socially suitable left-liberal opinions about everything', quoted in P. Kelly, 'The road less fellow travelled', *The Australian*, 7 August 2002, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ See for example R. Manne, 'Where are we now?', *Eureka Street*, January-February 2002, pp. 16-19; D. Horne, *Looking for Leadership: Australia in the Howard Years*, Viking, Ringwood, 2001, pp. 97-99, 260; P. Manning, 'Minding the Plimsoll Line', *The Australian (Media supplement)*, 20 April 2000, p. 6-7; M. Fraser, 'This obscenity must be repelled', *The Australian*, 22 June 1998, p. 13. Kelly discusses this phenomenon re Aboriginal questions: see P. Kelly, 'Do you trust this man? Black Australia Doesn't', *The Australian*, 13-14 December 1997, p. 21. See also S. Matchett, 'Review of the reviewers', *The Sydney Institute Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2 (July), 2002, pp. 22-29.
- ¹⁷ See text and signatories of an advertisement deploring Howard's asylum-seeker policy, 'Australia and the refugee crisis', *The Australian*, 6-7 October 2001, p. 15, 17, and responses to a request to sign a register for those prepared to engage in civil disobedience by harbouring asylum-seekers, and responses to requests for donations reported in P. Adams, 'A peace of the action', *The Australian, Review Section*, 13-14 July 2002, p. 32. See also A. Newman-Martin, 'Leaders fail to "defuse" race trigger', *The Australian*, 10 September 2001, p. 12.
- ¹⁸ See authors cited in note 10.
- ¹⁹ See C. Bean, et al. Australian Election Study, 2001 [computer file], Canberra: Social Science Data Archives (www.sdda.anu.edu.au), The Australian National University, 2002. This study is the work of Clive Bean, Queensland University of Technology, David Gow, University of Queensland and Ian McAllister, The Australian National University. These scholars, however, bear no responsibility for my analysis of their data.
- ²⁰ See Table in Betts 2001 op. cit., p. 42
- ²¹ Both the differences are significant at the 0.01 level. This means that there is a less than one in a hundred chance that the difference between the two sets of two groups has occurred by chance.
- ²² The difference between the disapprovers of the policy who voted Democrat or Green and the approvers who voted Democrat or Green is significant at the 0.05 level. This means that there is less than five in a hundred chances that the difference between the two groups has occurred by chance.
- ²³ See C. Chamberlain, *Class Consciousness in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1983. The rationale for using his system is set out in more detail in K. Betts, 'Class and the 1996 election', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1996, pp. 39-41 (available at <http://elecpress.monash.edu.au/pnp>)
- ²⁴ For a fuller analysis of the new class see Betts, *The Great Divide*, 1999, op. cit., Chapter 3. Their defining characteristic is their use of the culture of careful and critical discourse, a skill which is nurtured in the universities. Consequently many managers and administrators who are graduates are part of this grouping. Members of the new class are not all left-wing in either the traditional or the contemporary sense of this term.
- ²⁵ *Australian Standard of Classification of Occupations, Second Edition*, ABS, Canberra, 1997, Catalogue No. 1220.0, p. 2
- ²⁶ See K. Betts, 'Class and the 1996 election', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1996, pp. 38-45. The data analysed in the present article are a little different from those in this earlier piece. In 1996 I was unaware of the existence of the 1987 to 1993 AES files. For data on voting in 1993 I used the 1993 vote as recollected in the 1996 survey. I took the analysis back to 1967 by using data published for 1967, 1979 and 1984 in B. Graetz and I. McAllister, *Dimensions of Australian Society*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1988, p. 285. These earlier data were coded 'manual' and 'non-manual'. They have been omitted here in order to keep to a sequence of data collected in similar circumstances and, as far as possible, coded in the same way. The

change in the ASCO system in 1996 of course complicates this last objective.

- ²⁷ For the source note for AES 2001 see note 19. For AES 1987 see I. McAllister and A. Mughan. Australian Election Survey, 1987 [machine-readable data file], data collected by A. Ascui, Canberra: R. Jones, The Australian National University (ANU) [producer], 1987, Canberra: Social Science Data Archives (SSDA), ANU [distributor], 1987. For AES 1990 see I. McAllister et al. Australian election study, 1990 [computer file], principal investigators I. McAllister, R. Jones, E. Papadakis, D. Gow, Canberra: Roger Jones, SSDA, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU [producer], 1990, Canberra: SSDA, ANU[distributor], 1990. For AES 1993 see R. Jones et al., Australian Election Study, 1993 [computer file], Canberra: SSDA, ANU, 1993. For AES 1996 see R. Jones et al. Australian Election Study, 1996 [computer file], Canberra: SSDA, ANU, 1996. For AES 1998 see C. Bean et al., Australian Election Study, 1998 [computer file], Canberra: SSDA, ANU, 1998. The authors of these studies bear no responsibility for my interpretation of their work.
- ²⁸ A. Scott, 'Memo Mr Crean: the last thing Labor needs is "modernization"', *The Age*, 10 July 2002, p. 13