

# ORDER IN THE HOUSE

## Australian Politics 1983-2003

Australian politics is dominated by the Australian Labor Party (a social democratic party much like the British Labour Party or American Democrats), and a coalition of two conservative parties, the Liberal Party and the National Party. At a federal level, politics has been relatively static for the past two decades, with the Labor Party governing from 1983-1996, and the Coalition governing since 1996.

When Labor won office in 1983, its Prime Minister was Bob Hawke, a charismatic former trade union official. While studying at Oxford, Hawke won himself a place in the Guinness Book of Records by drinking 1.4 liters of beer in 12 seconds. In September 1983, when Australia broke the US's 132-year dominance over the America's Cup Yacht Race, Hawke proclaimed that any boss who fired a worker for taking the day off was a "bum." Unsurprisingly, he connected well with ordinary Australians.

During the 1980s, the Hawke Government implemented several major economic reforms. It floated the Australian dollar, dramatically reduced tariff barriers, and privatized Qantas airlines. In 1991, Paul Keating, a lover of Gustav Mahler and antique French clocks, decided to challenge Hawke for leadership. Keating won a ballot among federal Labor Party politicians and became Prime Minister. The beginning of Keating's five-year term was spent trying to pull Australia out of the early 1990s recession, which peaked with unemployment at 11%. As the economy began to recover, he moved on to other reforms. Keating began strengthening economic ties with Asia and asking Australians to admit responsibility for the brutal way in which their ancestors had treated the Aboriginal people.

In 1996, John Howard came through for the Coalition, trouncing Keating in a bitterly fought election. Recognizing that Keating's policies on Asia and indigenous Australians had made many voters uneasy, Howard promised that his new government would make the nation "relaxed and comfortable." When Pauline Hanson, a red-headed fishmonger who had been newly elected as an independent, began speaking of the need to reduce Asian immigration and criticizing Aborigi-

nal welfare, Howard was slow to condemn her views. In 1998, Hanson's party, One Nation, won a raft of seats in the Queensland state election. Amid constant infighting, financial irregularities, and the lack of a coherent set of policies, the One Nation party has now slid into irrelevance, but not without powerfully affecting the race debate in Australia.

In 2000, Australia switched to a Goods and Services Tax, a European-style value-added tax. The transition was unpopular, and in the lead-up to the 2001 election, it was widely expected the Howard would be defeated by the Labor Party, then led by Kim Beazley. But in August 2001, a Norwegian container ship, the *Tampa*, carrying 453 asylum-seekers picked up when their boat sank, was turned back from Australian waters. Labor opposed broad-based legislation to restrict refugee entry, and was painted as soft on refugees. Labor was trounced in the November 2001 election and after the poll, Simon Crean replaced Kim Beazley as leader of the Labor Party.

In the past few years, the political scene has been marked by debates over university funding, refugee policy, and the war in Iraq (Labor opposed the government's decision to send troops without a UN mandate). Labor has also experienced some infighting—in June 2003, Kim Beazley unsuccessfully challenged Simon Crean for leadership of the party. But the party's chances should not be underestimated, although it is out of power at the federal level. Labor has been in government in all six states and two territories since 2001.

Despite the limitations of a three-year election cycle, Australian governments have managed to bring about a number of important reforms over the past two decades. Its healthcare system provides universal coverage to all Australians. Its social security system is better able to handle upcoming demographic changes than the US's European system. And thanks to a swag of reforms, its economy has been one of the best performing in the OECD. But major challenges remain to be confronted. Australia's unemployment rate is unacceptably high, inequality is rapidly rising, and educational attainment is inadequate for a twenty-first century workforce.

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