

August 21st would be the first Australian general election during the past two decades which I will be watching from a distance. In 1992, months after I first arrived in Australia, I witnessed the then Treasurer, Paul Keating being elected as the mid-term Prime Minister by the Labor Party parliamentary caucus after he successfully challenged Bob Hawke who had been the Prime Minister for the previous decade. Little did I realize then that this rivalry between prime minister and treasurer was also going to plague the next Liberal government throughout its 11 years term only to be replaced by a rivalry between leader and deputy in the following Labor government right up to the 2010 general election and probably beyond. This real or perceived intra-party quarrels and leadership struggles were to become a media-built up distraction at every future general election only to be overtaken by more relevant issues as the polling day approaches.

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Sri Lanka following the end of a protracted war was responsible for the surge of asylum seekers). Another issue, linked to the immigration policy, entered the public debate arena in early this year, has started to influence the election campaign is that of the population policy. When the Productivity Council predicted a population growth projection of twice the present figure for the mid-century, Kevin Rudd publicly stated that he would like to see a bigger Australia. Conservative social commentators and the Liberal Opposition seized on this to portray the Labor government of being irresponsible and letting Australia to be swamped by the unchecked runaway immigration levels. The government quickly responded by creating a cabinet "Ministry for Population" in order to explore the optimum level of future population growth. However, refugee boats kept arriving at the rate, as Liberal spokespersons kept pointing out, "3 boats per week as against 3 per year during the Liberal rule" and the government had no effective response to counter these damaging allegations.

As the general election was fast approaching, the government announced a major new policy to tax the mining industry's excessive profits at a higher rate to raise revenues to spend on infrastructure, to enable company tax cuts and to bring the budget into surplus. This move, expected to go well with the electorate, backfired when the powerful mining lobby launched a media campaign against it stating that the new resources super profit tax will result in job losses due to cancelling of investments in the sector. By June this year, opinion polls were showing further slump in Labor's fortunes down



Two Decades of Australian General Elections

from a Sri Lankan Perspective

the leadership of Paul Keating surprised the public and pollsters alike by managing to win the 1993 general election which was dubbed "the election which the Liberals just couldn't lose". From the residence of my daughter/son-in-law in Keating's own electorate of Banks on the night of that election day, I watched the predominantly immigrant community of Bankstown celebrate Keating's "sweetest victory of all".

(I have closely watched all general elections in Ceylon since independence and the 1977 general election of Republic of Sri Lanka, all of which were held under the Westminster style of "first-past the post" constituency based system. In addition, I have also witnessed a few general elections in India where, even though under a federal system, elections are held for 543 constituencies of the lower house under the Westminster style first-past the-post system. This first ever Australian election I witnessed immensely appealed to me because, although it is constituency based, the Australian system provides the choice for voters to cast their preferences to all contenders and the winner will be announced only once a leading candidate acquires enough preferences to pass 50 per cent plus one votes polled. This system prevents a candidate from being elected with only about 30-40 per cent votes cast with rest of the 60-70 per cent of votes dispersed amongst other candidates as happened in Sri Lanka a number of instances before 1977. If Sri Lanka adopted a similar system after 1977, today's farcical "manapa" system could have been prevented from taking roots and corrupting the whole electoral system).

Come 1996 and the Australian electoral landscape had changed. Labor, under Keating had reneged on most of the promises and the voters in the middle had become tired of the Labor's 13 year long incumbency. By 1994, our family had moved further south-west in Sydney to the Hughes constituency where a new Liberal Party candidate, a genial lady named Danna Vale was poised to wrest the seat from the sitting Labor cabinet minister and continue to hold it for the next 14 years. The Liberal Party resurrected the once sidelined John Howard to the leadership and won the election convincingly and ushered in a conservative agenda which dominated the Australian socioeconomic polity for the next 11 years. Innately backward-looking, John Howard allowed some hitherto dormant reactionary forces to emerge and conduct a public debate on what the Australian social policy, particularly the policy on population composition should become. When the debate got out-of-hand, with the emergence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, Howard neutralised those voices by absorbing some of their opinions into his own agenda. Thus, the impending 1998 general election, which seemed to be shaping up to become a contest on immigration and population policy, turned out to be a largely non-issue election except for the govern-

ment's move. Howard hurriedly dissolved the Parliament and called a late September general election announcing that he would decide who should come to settle in Australia and the circumstances under which they come. When September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, DC took place the anti-immigration resolve of the electorate, specially against people from Islamic nations, further strengthened and

Whoever becomes the Prime Minister of Australia on August 21st, I wish that the President of Sri Lanka, while congratulating the newly elected PM, would assure him or her that there is no need to approach third countries to seek a solution for an issue between two liberal democracies with a long standing history of diplomatic relations and cooperation

Liberals won a third term in what came to be known as the Tampa election. In an ominous trend to re-emerge after nine years, Sri Lanka figured in marginally during an election campaign for the first time because a few Sri Lankans were spotted among the Afghan and Middle-Eastern cargo of the Tampa.

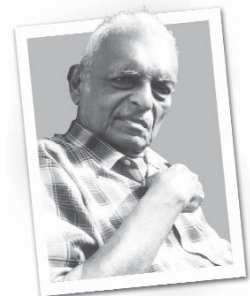
When 2004 general election was announced, Labor, with its untested but exciting new leader, Mark Latham gained a head start in the campaign. But when the polling day approached, Liberals, with the aid of a clever advertising campaign, undermined the leadership credentials of Latham and the electorate became suspicious of his aggressive campaign style resulting in a record fourth-term victory for the existing government.

Almost three months after the Labor election defeat, when Mark Latham, still convalescing after a bout of a pancreatic illness, failed to appear to make a public response to the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami devastation, the Labor Party, tried to revive its hopes again with Kim Beazley as the leader but when it became clear that he did not have what it takes to defeat formidable John Howard, in December 2006 it opted for Kevin Rudd, a diplomat turned politician with liberal Christian convictions as its leader with Julia Gillard, an unwed former trade union lawyer with no religious convictions, as the deputy leader. For the first time in ten years, this appeared to be an acceptable combination which offered a credible alternative to the tired Liberal government which appeared to have lost its vision and had no accordance to develop a policy framework to tackle looming issues such as climate change and the apparent population growth

support in the Parliament. But both Rudd and Turnbull failed to discern the unwillingness of the larger Australia to a commitment to action on climate change before the biggest emitters of green house gases, i.e., USA, China, India, etc., come on board. Last December, the Liberal Party replaced the Turnbull leadership with an ultra-conservative, climate change sceptic, Tony Abbot. Few days later, Rudd attended and played a prominent part in the international climate change conference in Copenhagen which ended as a damp squib with no binding agreement. Highly demoralised, Rudd nevertheless persisted with moving the emissions trading bill in the Parliament early this year but it was knocked back by Liberal and Greens Senators. With counseling of his deputy, Julia Gillard, Rudd decided to defer any action on climate change until after the general elections and started to concentrate on other pressing matters in this election year.

After the first three months of this year, the popularity of the Labor Government started to wane with revelations that showpiece stimulus package projects such as home insulation and building school-halls schemes have become wasteful adventures and that the government has not only wasted the budget surpluses left over by the departing Liberal administration but, probably, will leave a massive debt to be repaid by future generations. Tony Abbot, meanwhile, was busy trying to change his persona from that of a religious bigot to an energetic man of the people with a limited success although he continued to lag far behind Rudd in "preferred prime minister" stakes in opinion polls. Searching for one issue which could overshadow all others during the impending election campaign, Abbot, it seemed, was given a lifeline by the continuous arrivals into Australian maritime waters of boats carrying asylum seekers. Liberal Party started accusing the government of being responsible for the massive increase in boat arrivals because it abandoned the policy of issuing only-temporary protection visas to refugees and it closed down the asylum seekers processing center in Nauru built by the Liberal government in the wake of Tampa crisis nine years ago. The Labor government could not give any effective response to these allegations and continued to state that it was not the government policy but the worsening conditions of the source countries such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka caused the increase in boat arrivals.

(In October 2009 when a boat carrying 255 Sri Lankans heading towards Australian territorial waters was towed back to Indonesia at Kevin Rudd's request to Indonesian President and another 78 Sri Lankans were rescued by an Australian naval vessel and taken back to an Indonesian port, the Minister for Immigration, Senator Chris Evans stated that it was not the softer government policy but the disturbances in



By S Piyasena

to an elections losing position from unassailable heights it enjoyed few months ago. Taken aback, Labor Party caucus, in an unprecedented move, removed a first-term prime minister and on 25th June installed Julia Gillard as the prime minister to take the party into the next election.

Although the Australian public, Labor supporters, Liberal supporters and the undecided alike, did not appreciate the ruthless manner in which once highly popular PM was deposed, the opinion polls conducted soon after the leadership spill suggested that Julia Gillard has recouped some of the lost popularity and that she is best advised to announce an election before the political honeymoon which new leaders enjoy start to evaporate. Trying to clear-up the decks before dissolving the parliament, Gillard hurriedly concluded a deal with three of the biggest miners which seemed to be more acceptable to the mining lobby than the one proposed under Rudd. Then, she announced that the Labor Party under her did not stand for a "bigger Australia" but for "sustainable future growth" and re-named the recently created ministry the "Ministry for Sustainable Population". On 5th July, Gillard took everyone by surprise by announcing a plan to set-up an off-shore processing center for boat people in East Timor. This, initially seemed to be an acceptable solution to both sides of the divide on the asylum seekers issue but, as time passed, it was revealed that this is just a cynical move to put the issue aside until the election is over and done with. It was also revealed that she has not even used the proper protocol or consulted the East Timor government before announcing the decision. On 25th July Julia Gillard dissolved the lower house of the Parliament and asked a mandate