



from the Australian people for "moving forward". She announced that her government has prevented a recession, moved closer to the policies of the former Howard government on border protection issues and would be setting up a public forum to formulate a policy on climate change. Since then a host of policy announcements on education, broadband network, infrastructure, aged-care, superannuation, etc., are being made on a daily basis only to be countered by Opposition's pronouncements on all these issues and a few more.

As the election comes near most of these policy announcements will be counterbalanced by each side's rhetoric and only the big issues will play on the ears of voters. Presently a number of other distractions have come into play. Kevin Rudd's continuous presence in the campaign, albeit only in his own electorate, has a destablising effect on the Labor campaign while Julia Gillard's marital status and her atheism have become distractions. The Reserve Bank's decision not to raise interest rates during an election campaign, as opposed to what it did for the first time ever at the last election, may have a positive effect on Labor's fortunes. What matters, however, on the election day is how the residents in 30 or so marginal constituencies would vote. Barring a landslide, the Australian general elections are usually fought and won, or lost, in the marginal seats. Out of the 150 seats, about a hundred are considered to be blue ribbon wealthy Liberal, hardened working-class Labor, or country-side National Party seats. The remaining seats become usually up for grabs and the political parties usually spend most of their energies and resources into these seats which are usually won on preferences. A case in point is the south western Sydney seat of Hughes where I have lived, off and on, for the past 17 years. This was a safe Labor seat for much of the 40 years prior to 1996 but since then became a safe Liberal seat almost solely on the popularity of its sitting member, Danna Vale. Due to a re-distribution of borders and the fact that now Danna Vale is not re-contesting, this has become a "nationally marginal seat", with Labor needing less than one per cent swing to wrest the seat back from Liberals. Most of these seats where struggling, but aspirational voters, reside, are situated in western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and in resource-rich areas of Western Australia and Queensland. That is why a new tax on mining projects and carbon emissions and a tougher/softer policies on border protection resonate amongst these voters.

The 2010 general election which should have been a referendum on a climate change is likely to become a contest on mundane issues or, if more and more boats are spotted on the horizon, deteriorate into another election on border protection credentials with each party trying to out do each other on being tougher on asylum seekers and each announcing plans for processing centers in Nauru, East Timor, Papua new Guinea, etc., and of negotiations with transit countries and source countries regardless of whether these countries are signatories to the UNHCR Refugee Convention. When, in October last year, arrivals of boats filled with Sri Lankans reached a crisis point, the Australian Foreign Minister, Stephan Smith visited Sri Lanka and issued a communique stating: "Australia and Sri Lanka have jointly committed enhanced cooperation against the criminal organisers of the people smuggling trade, encourage regional cooperation on the matter, undertake public information to alert Sri Lankan citizens to the dangers of maritime people smuggling". Since then, boats continue to arrive and the debate about "Sri Lankan refugees" is likely to escalate before the election and is likely to continue beyond the election irrespective of which party comes to power. It is still not too late for the Sri Lankan Government to reach out to the Australian Government to establish a cooperative approach to tackle this issue. The Sri Lankan authorities may explain to Australian authorities that the country has just returned to normalcy after eliminating a ruthless terrorist group and that Sri Lanka is a functioning democracy where no person is discriminated for ethnicity and religious or political beliefs.

Whoever becomes the Prime Minister of Australia on August 21st, I wish that the President of Sri Lanka, while congratulating the newly elected PM, will 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 long standing diplomatic relations and cooperation. He may also suggest that any Sri Lankans unlawfully entering Australia could be returned to Sri Lanka and they could be transparently relocated under a program of resettlement coordinated by Sri Lankan and Australian authorities. Under the present circumstances the Australian authorities would certainly welcome such an approach from Sri Lanka.

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