

LABOR'S SHRINKING CONSTITUENCY

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This article explores the extent to which Labor at the national level is becoming dependent on an ethnic constituency. It shows that, in Melbourne and Sydney, the great majority of the seats which Labor held on to after the 2004 election were seats with significant concentrations of blue- and lower white-collar voters of non-English-speaking-background origin.

Why did Labor lose the Federal Elections of 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004? The short answer is that, since 1996, the Party has lost its grip on the voting block that was once its lifeline. This is the blue-collar constituency. In 1996, for the first time in the Party's history, a higher proportion of blue-collar males indicated that they voted for the Coalition than for Labor.¹ By the 2004 election, nothing much had changed. The proportion of blue-collar males voting Labor as their first preference was about the same as the share who voted for the Coalition.²

The seriousness of this situation for Labor can be gauged by the fact that at the 2004 election the Coalition received a higher proportion of first preference votes amongst persons who were managers and administrators, professionals and associate professionals and clerical sales and service workers than did Labor.³ Labor has made up some ground with other constituencies, particularly the growing number of social professionals but, as indicated, a higher proportion of all professional and associate professional voters are giving their first preference vote to the Coalition than to Labor. As a consequence, at the 2004 federal election, Labor's first preference House of Representatives vote fell to 37.6 per cent, the Party's lowest since the elections of 1931 and 1934.⁴ By contrast, the first preference vote for the Coalition was 46.7 per cent in 2004.

It is widely accepted that, particularly at the time of the 1996 and 2001 elections, the Coalition's inroads into the blue-collar vote reflected its ability to tap into disillusionment with Labor's embrace of intelligentsia causes — including Republicanism, multiculturalism, the advance of minority interests, and Aboriginal reconciliation. In 2001, the border protection issue kept such causes in the foreground. In effect, cultural and social issues prevailed over class issues.

The explanation for the Coalition's success in 2004 is more problematic. Divisions on social and cultural issues were not so apparent. Labor's new leader, Mark Latham, set out to defuse or neutralise these issues. The focus of his campaign was on Labor's claim that it would distribute the fruits of economic growth more equably and that it would be far more proactive than the Coalition Government in facilitating opportunity for all (as through education). For its part, the Coalition also concentrated on economic issues, particularly its capacity to maintain the economic boom without any escalation in interest rates.

Despite this apparent switch to class-orientated issues, Labor failed to make much headway amongst blue-collar voters. Why? According to social researcher, Hugh Mackay, Labor is disadvantaged because contemporary voters approach elections from a selfish point of

view, reflecting their preoccupation with gratifying themselves through individual gains in income and consumption. He thinks Australians have been assailed by a series of highly disruptive social and economic changes, which include the impact of economic globalisation and the challenges of multiculturalism. In response:

...they have sought consolation and compensation for their feelings of powerlessness by bringing their horizons up close and concentrating on things they can control: backyards, home renovations, children's schooling, holidays.⁵

The Coalition's ability to exploit the fears of homeowners that mortgage rates would increase under Labor⁶ (the main explanation offered by political pundits for Labor's failure to dent the Coalition's majority at the 2004 election) fits snugly within this 'big picture' framework. Consistent with this interpretation, the election results showed the Coalition winning handsomely in outer suburban electorates where large numbers of homeowners are still paying off their mortgages.

In our view, there is an element of amnesia about this commentary. It is unlikely that popular attitudes about what each party represents on social and cultural issues would have evaporated by the time of the 2004 election. Latham did his best to distance himself from the elite social and cultural concerns associated with Labor at the Federal level. However, he needed far more time than was available for such distancing to make much of an impact.

This study puts this interpretation to the test. The starting point is the hypothesis that birthplace continues to shape the voting pattern of many voters, particularly those of blue-collar origin. The focus on birthplace arises out of previous research, conducted by the Centre for

Population and Urban Research, into the reasons why the Labor Party's representation in the national parliament from Sydney had shrunk to a group of seats concentrated in west and south west Sydney.⁷ All of the seats in question featured high proportions of residents of low-income non-English-speaking background (NESB). By contrast, with the exception of the inner city electorates of Grayndler and Sydney, all other areas of Sydney, including the outer suburban areas with relatively high proportions of Australian-born blue and lower white-collar voters, were held by the Liberal party. Prior to the 1996 election, Labor held most of these outer suburban seats.⁸

The previous research shows that this geographical division mirrors a sharp divide in voting patterns by birthplace. The blue-collar vote in Australia, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney, has been split on birthplace lines.⁹ In 2001, those born in Australia, the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries gave majority support to the Coalition, while those born in NESB countries supported Labor — by a wide margin. This division is of particular significance in Sydney and Melbourne because of the high concentration of blue-collar NESB-born voters in these cities. Their strong support for Labor, as well as their concentration in Sydney's western and south-western suburbs, was sufficient to account for most of the seats Labor held in Sydney in 2001.

WHY BIRTHPLACE MATTERS

In this study, we investigate the extent to which this voting division continues to explain voting outcomes in Australia. The focus is the election outcome in 2004 for Sydney and Melbourne. This does not mean, however, that persons of NESB origin are not also attached to Labor on class grounds. Most of the great post-war

migration stream from Southern and Eastern Europe entered blue-collar occupations. This is also true of many in the subsequent Asian stream, though with the rationalisation of manufacturing industry, many have had little choice but to engage in small-scale retail and other businesses — often serving co-ethnics. Their income levels have been low and many are dependent on pensions and benefits. The Coalition has little to offer these people.

Class issues also appear to influence the voting patterns of NESB migrants with professional and higher level managerial occupations. This part of the NESB stream is far more likely to be in tune with the Coalition's emphasis on enterprise. According to the sample of these voters reported by the 2004 Australian Electoral Study, they are just as likely to vote for the Coalition as their Australia-born counterparts.¹⁰

Nevertheless, we believe that the attachment to Labor on the part of NESB blue-collar voters is also cultural. Former Labor Prime Ministers Hawke and Whitlam worked hard to cultivate the ethnic constituency. Because, in the past, Labor has shown the greatest willingness to promote state intervention on behalf of the less well off, Labor was well placed to win the support of this constituency. In addition, Labor's strong endorsement of multiculturalism and of high migration (including generous family-reunion policies) has particularly appealed to ethnic community leaders and power brokers.

Further, the Labor Party organisation has provided an avenue for ethnic activists wishing to pursue a political career. Such activists can use their ethnic community base to help in this endeavour. They have made significant inroads as party functionaries and representatives, particularly at the local government and State parliamentary levels in Melbourne

and Sydney. From the point of view of many ethnic voters in Melbourne and Sydney, Labor is 'their' party. Publicity about the role of migrants in branch stacking controversies has helped cement this image. Recent revelations and factional blood-letting concerning the recruitment of ethnic minority members to shore up the power plays of Labor's factional 'warlords' are just the latest episodes in the history of such events.¹¹

Associations between the more affluent Asian middle-class communities and Labor are not nearly so strong. This helps explain why there does not seem to be a parallel cultural factor working in favour of Labor amongst these communities.

The flip side of Labor's association with ethnic minority interests is that non-ethnic voters are less likely to identify with Labor. Since the 1980s, Labor's advocacy of multiculturalism has been associated with an intellectual environment of disparagement towards the inherited Australian identity and national culture. The 'native' majority has been often treated with suspicion or hostility by multicultural advocates, including some prominent Labor leaders. It has since been amply demonstrated that working class and lower white-collar native Australians oppose policies which emphasise diversity at the expense of solidarity and resent disparagement of their Australian heritage. In the eyes of such voters, the Coalition has seized the high ground with its 'One Australia' position and the vigour of its defence of Australian sovereignty in dealing with asylum seekers. Betts has shown that the gulf in social and cultural values between Federal Labor representatives and their blue- and lower white-collar native-born constituency is far larger than it is for Coalition voters and their representatives.¹²

Not all of the post-2004 election commentators have ignored the argument

articulated above. The Parliamentary Library's account of the election outcome acknowledges the importance of the divide between Labor elites and ordinary voters, particularly as manifested in the party's forestry policy at the 2004 election.¹³

There is also a stream of commentary from the Left, which highlights the success of the Coalition in attracting mainstream voters to its social issues agenda. Denis Glover, former Labor Party advisor, thinks this helps explain the Coalition's 2004 success. He asserts, however, that Healy and Birrell have not been sufficiently critical of the Coalition's social agenda, nor of the way it has manipulated opinion to its ends. Glover sees the voting outcomes as a consequence of a systematic campaign in which ordinary people's fears have been manipulated to turn them against Aborigines, asylum seekers and welfare recipients.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Glover acknowledges Healy and Birrell's empirical findings regarding the division of voting according to birthplace and the impact of this division on voting in suburban Sydney.

A similar viewpoint to Glover's is advanced by writer John Birmingham, who reports on social and political attitudes in Ipswich in the *Monthly* magazine. Birmingham thinks that the Coalition campaigns relating to the *Tampa* have helped create a public that is 'coarsened in spirit'.¹⁵ He examines the lives of the new settlers moving into the new urban frontier between Brisbane and Ipswich, whom he considers to be classic aspirational, living in big houses (mortgaged to the hilt). They are remote from Trade Union concerns, as well as from Labor's intelligentsia agenda:

Many, seduced by the individualist mythology that lies at the heart of neo-liberal economic thought, would prefer to think of themselves as independent contractors.¹⁶

While we take issue below with such jaundiced characterisations of the people

in question, we note that neither Glover nor Birmingham deny that birthplace has become a potent factor amongst blue-collar voters.

Nonetheless, with the exception of Glover, there has been remarkably little discussion of the extent and significance of voting divisions around birthplace. Is Labor at the federal level now reliant on an ethnic base for its electoral support? If so, what does this imply for its capacity to win back mainstream voters?

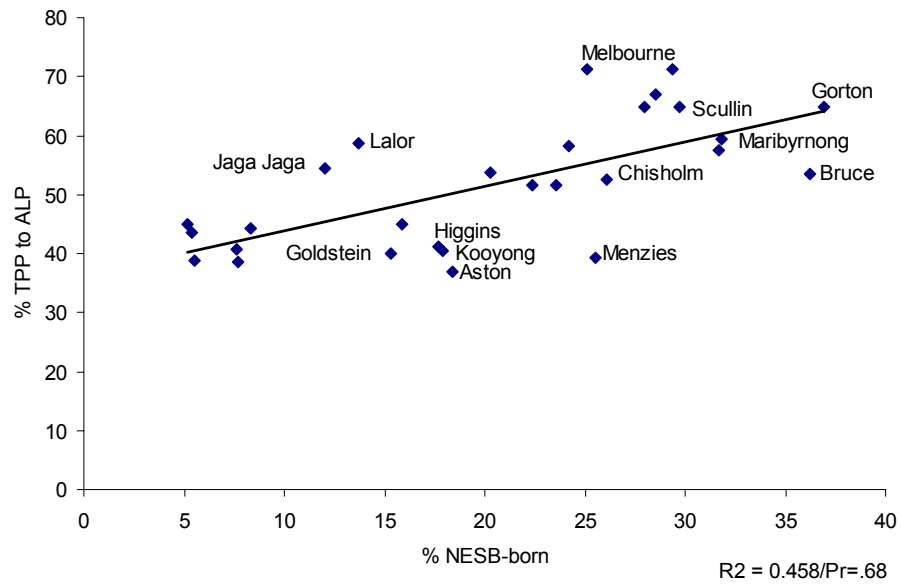
BIRTHPLACE AND VOTING IN 2004

Melbourne

After having held its ground better in Melbourne than in Sydney in 1996, Labor continued to hold more seats in Melbourne than in Sydney after the 2004 federal election, (16 out of 25 seats in Melbourne and 14 out of 27 in Sydney). Does this mean that the demographic and social basis of Labor support is different in Melbourne from that in Sydney, and that the ethnic factor is less evident in Melbourne? One reason for doubting such a proposition is that Labor's share of the two-party-preferred (TPP) vote in Melbourne and Sydney, overall, was similar in 2004.

A first indication of the strength of the relationship between ethnicity and voting is Labor's domination of the belt of federal seats in the west and north of Melbourne. These include Lalor, Gorton, Maribyrnong, Scullin, Wills, Calwell and Batman, all of which feature high concentrations of NESB voters. One exception to this relationship in the north of Melbourne is Jaga Jaga, where NESB concentrations are relatively low. Labor's success in this seat appears to be explained by the relatively low-income status of the electorate. Another is the seat of Melbourne where, as Figure 1 shows, the TPP vote to Labor is above

Figure 1: Per cent population born in non-English speaking countries (NESB) 2001, by per cent two-party preferred (TPP) vote to ALP 2004, Commonwealth Electoral Divisions, Melbourne



what might be expected if the NESB concentration was the main determinant. The seat of Melbourne includes gentrifying areas with very high levels of voting support for the Greens, as well as pockets of low income NESB voters in Richmond and Collingwood who mostly vote Labor.

The strength of the relationship between NESB concentrations and Labor’s electoral performance is shown in Figure 1.¹⁷ It would have been preferable to restrict the NESB population to those in blue-collar occupations. However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001 Census Community Profile data from which the electoral data were drawn did not permit this calculation. This helps explain why the seat of Menzies seems to be an outlier. The NESB share of its population is relatively high, but the TPP vote for Labor is low. This is because of the relatively high share of the NESB vote in the electorate which was drawn from

the managerial and professional classes. Such voters — whether in Melbourne or Sydney (see the discussion on the seat of Bennelong below) tend to favour the Coalition.

But, in Melbourne, Labor has held on to a belt of seats in South and South-eastern Melbourne, including Chisholm, Bruce, Hotham, Isaacs and Holt. These seats adjoin the blue ribbon Coalition seats of Kooyong, Higgins and Goldstein. Chisholm and Bruce, in particular, are not usually thought of as part of the Labor heartland like the western and northern seats listed above.

At first glance, it seems incongruous that Labor has been able to hold on to these seats. They include the moderately affluent local government areas of Monash and Kingston. These locations have a high level of home ownership and consist of homes built in the 1960s or earlier, with house prices being around \$400,000. Residents of such areas would

not normally be predisposed to vote Labor. In addition, the seat of Holt includes some recently developed outer suburban areas, including parts of the City of Casey. This is home-owner territory, with a high proportion of households who are still paying off mortgages. If such voters were afraid of increased mortgages under Labor, how is it that Labor held the electorate of Holt?

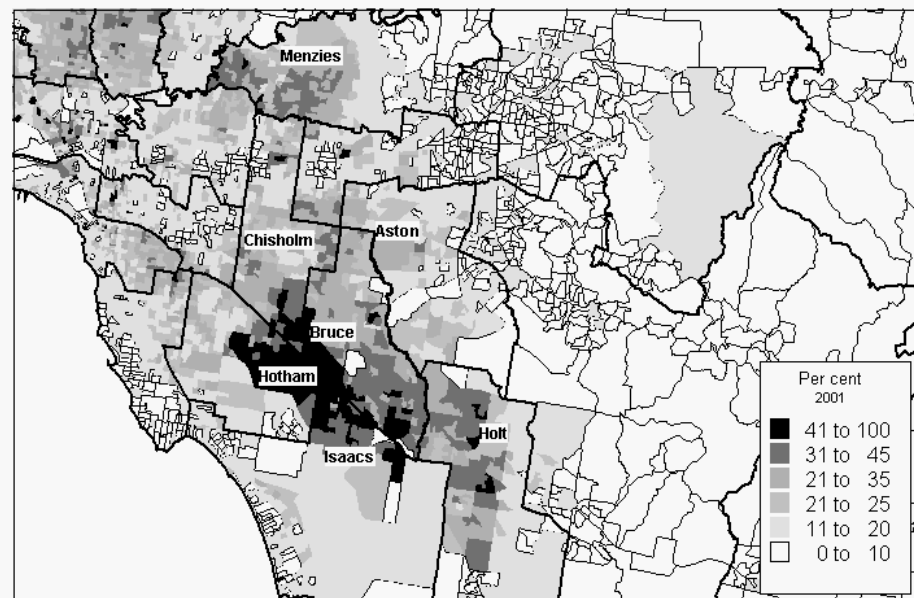
The mortgage factor may well have come into play because there were significant swings against Labor in these five seats in 2004, particularly in Holt and Isaacs. Nonetheless, Labor hung on. As Figure 1 shows, there are strong concentrations of NESB communities adjoining the railway line between Oakleigh and Dandenong. Chisholm, Bruce, Hotham and Isaacs each includes chunks of these communities. So, is the ethnic factor the explanation?

An examination of polling booth results suggests that the ethnic factor is decisive.

In all of the booths located in and around the NESB neighbourhoods shown in Figure 2, Labor received 60 per cent or more of the TPP vote. This was enough to overcome the close vote elsewhere, particularly in the non-NESB booths in the electorates of Chisholm and Bruce. Examples of the voting outcomes for booths with high NESB concentrations are shown in Table 1 for Chisholm, Bruce and Hotham, along with comparisons for booths in areas with low NESB concentrations.

A similar effect is observed in Isaacs and Holt. Isaacs covers Melbourne's southern suburbs of Mentone and Parkdale, where the Coalition does well, and the battler territory from Aspendale to Carrum where, despite quite strong swings to the Coalition, Labor narrowly won. The reason Labor held on in Isaacs was that there was an electoral redistribution in 2003, which added several NESB areas around Noble Park and Springvale to the

Figure 2: Per cent persons born in non-English-speaking background (NESB) countries 2001, selected Melbourne Commonwealth Electoral Divisions, 2004



Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Basics 2001

Table 1 of Selected Melbourne Commonwealth Electoral Divisions, two-party preferred (TPP), results for ALP by NESB concentration, 2004 federal election

Commonwealth electoral division	Suburban area	High/low NESB *	Booth	TPP vote for ALP %	
Holt	Endeavour Hills	High	Endeavour Hills	56.8	
		High	Endeavour Hills East	55.6	
		High	Gleneagles	57.2	
		High	Endeavour Hills Nth	53.0	
	Hampton Park	High	Kilberry Valley	56.9	
		Cranbourne	Low	Cranbourne West	51.4
			Low	Cranbourne	44.4
	Low	Courtney Gardens	45.7		
	Narre Warren Sth	Low	Narre Warren Sth	46.7	
	Narre Warren Nth	Low	Maramba	45.7	
Cranbourne Nth	Low	Lyndhurst	48.8		
Chisholm	Clayton	High	Clayton	66.4	
		High	Clayton East	65.9	
	Mt Waverley	Low	Essex Heights	49.3	
		Low	Mt Waverley	44.8	
	Glen Waverley	Low	Glendal	48.6	
Bruce	Harrisfield	High	Harrisfield	64.4	
		High	Sandown Park	72.6	
		High	Oakwood Park	65.9	
		High	Silverton	64.4	
	Dandenong Nth	High	Woorana Park	64.0	
	Wheelers Hill	Low	Mount View	36.9	
		Low	Wheelers Hill	37.5	
		Low	Waverley Meadows	49.3	
Hotham	Springvale	High	Springvale West	76.5	
		High	Springvale	70.2	
		High	Heatherhill	70.6	
	Moorabin	Low	Moorabin Sth	48.8	
		Low	Moorabin South east	53.9	
		Low	Moorabin Heights	52.5	
		Low	Kingston Heath	51.5	
Gorton	Sydenham	Low	Sydenham	60.2	
		Low	Sydenham East	59.9	
	Caroline Springs	Moderate	Brookside	62.0	
		Kings Park	High	Kings Park	76.0
			High	St Albans West	75.2
	High	St Albans Sth	71.0		
	High	Glengala	72.5		
	High	Glengala Sth	77.5		

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census Basics, 2001 and Australian Electoral Commission.

* High is > 25 % NESB-born; Low is < 20 % NESB-born

In the absence of this redistribution, Labor would have lost Isaacs. These areas were redistributed from Holt, thus detracting from this seat's previous status as a safe Labor seat. Nevertheless, Labor won in Holt — marginally. It did so because it polled well in Endeavour Hills, Hallam and Hampton Park, all areas of growing numbers of NESB residents (see Table 1). Hotham is a secure Labor seat, made all the more so by its sizeable NESB component.

This analysis indicates that the reason why Labor has a greater electoral presence in Melbourne than in Sydney is an artefact of electoral geography. The NESB-born voting population is dispersed in a way that (relative to Sydney) maximises the impact of its preference for Labor. In Melbourne, if the NESB communities along the Oakleigh to Dandenong railway line had been located in one electorate (for example, as an extension of Hotham), Labor would not have won Chisholm, Bruce or Isaacs.

The limits of the mortgage hypothesis

The seat of Holt is of particular interest in regard to the mortgage factor. The seat includes several areas where, in class terms, the residents should be rusted on Labor voters. The local areas of Cranbourne and Narre Warren, which are part of the City of Casey, exemplify this point. The male residents are predominantly blue-collar workers. Though they are home owners, house prices in these areas are at the low end of the outer suburban market in Melbourne, at around \$200,000 to \$250,000. For the most part, these are modest suburban areas. Indeed, in the past the voters have supported Labor. If the party is now unable to win in such areas, one wonders where it will ever make inroads amongst suburban voters.

The results of the 2004 election in these areas were stunning. In the booths

around the Cranbourne township, there were large swings away from Labor. Four of these are listed in Table 1. The TPP vote for Labor fell short of a fifty per cent split in three out of the four booths. In Narre Warren, the Coalition won nearly 55 per cent. These results are consistent with the mortgage hypothesis. This is because the areas have only recently been settled and most households are still paying off mortgages.

However, the puzzle is that, if the mortgage factor was so significant, what is the explanation for the quite different levels of support for Labor in the outer suburban areas of western and northern Melbourne and ostensibly similar areas in the south-east? These areas contain suburbs which are similar in that they are predominantly blue-collar locations and the residents are recent home owners at the lower end of the new housing market.

The seat of Gorton in Melbourne's outer north-western suburban fringe illustrates the point. The results from several of the booths in this electorate are listed in Table 1. The booths cover areas which vary in date of construction. The Caroline Springs area is of particular interest because it is well known in Melbourne as the location of a master-planned estate complete with artificial lakes and a modern village style shopping centre. The houses are relatively expensive for the north-west (around \$350,000). The male residents are working predominantly in blue-collar occupations, particularly as tradesmen. The area appears to be a classic aspirational zone. Yet, as Table 1 shows, Labor won the booth in this area easily. One difference from Cranbourne is that a much higher proportion of Caroline Springs' residents are born in NESB countries (30 per cent). In addition, many more of the residents who were Australia-born claimed to be of NESB ancestry. In total, 52 per cent claimed NESB ancestry

according to the 2001 Census. In our view, it is this difference which is likely to explain the higher vote for Labor in Caroline Springs.

The impact of birthplace in the mortgage belt

In order to test the relative significance of the birthplace and mortgage factors further, we identified areas with similar shares of blue-collar male voters and proportions of dwellings mortgaged, but quite different proportions of NESB-born voters.¹⁸

Figure 3 shows areas that are similar in that they have higher percentages of males working in blue-collar jobs and higher proportions of dwellings which are mortgaged than does the Melbourne Statistical Division. They do, however, have contrasting proportions of persons born in non-English speaking countries.

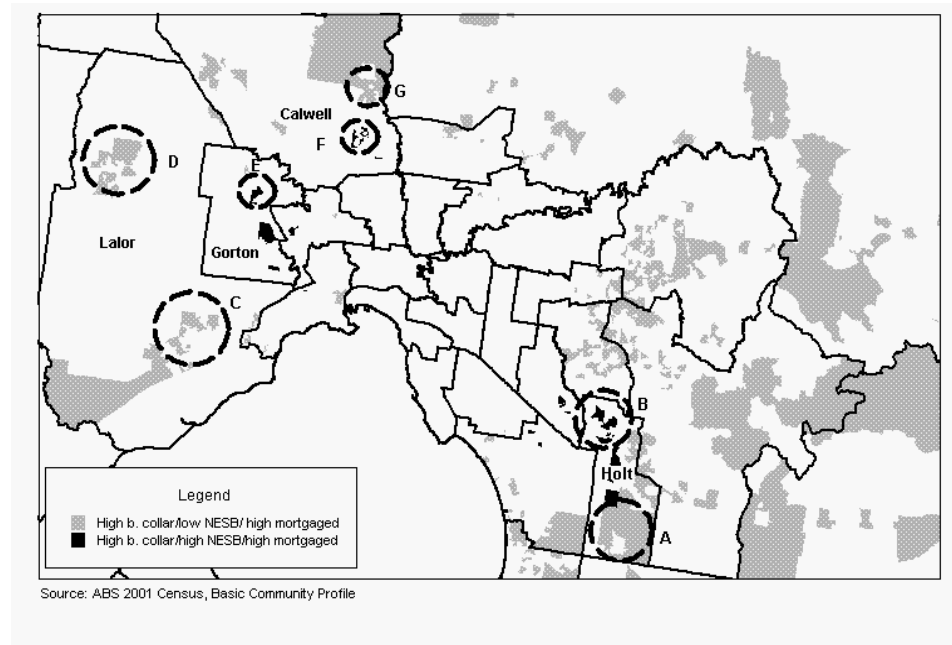
Blue-collar mortgage-belt areas with higher proportions of persons born in

non-English-speaking countries include the suburbs of Hallam (area B), Delahey (area E), and Meadow Heights (area F). By contrast, blue-collar mortgage-belt areas with lower proportions of persons born in non-English-speaking countries include Cranbourne (area A), Melton (area D), Wyndham North (area C), and Craigieburn (area G).

Voting behaviour is quite different between the predominantly Australia-born voters of Cranbourne (area A) and the predominantly NESB voters of Hallam (area B). As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the TPP support for Labor in the Cranbourne area was less than 50 per cent at many booths, yet voters in the Hallam area strongly supported Labor. Similarly, the contrast in voting behaviour between Cranbourne in the south-east and Delahey (area E, a relatively newly developed area) in the north-west is striking.

The remaining areas for discussion are all located in the north or west of

Figure 3: Melbourne, selected locations with above average proportion of males in blue-collar occupations and above average proportion of dwellings mortgaged, but with contrasting levels of NESB-born residents, 2001



Melbourne. These areas have a solid Labor-voting tradition. The differences in Labor voting shown in Table 2 are more matters of degree of support rather than (at this stage) posing any danger that Labor could lose seats. Labor dominates in the

high-NESB areas of Delahey (area E) and Meadow Heights (area F). However, in the Wyndham North and Craigieburn areas (areas C and G), Labor support is much lower (though still a majority). These are areas of relatively low NESB concen

Table 2: TPP results for the Australian Labor Party for selected areas with above average proportion of dwellings mortgaged and above average male blue-collar workforce, but contrasting levels of residents born in NESB countries.

	Above/ below average NESB *	Booth	TPP vote for ALP (%)
Location A (Cranbourne)	Below average	Cranbourne	44.4
		Courtney Gardens	45.7
		Narre Warren Sth	46.7
		Maramba	45.7
		Lyndhurst	48.8
		Cranbourne West	51.4
Location B (Hallam)	Above average	Endeavour Hills	56.8
		Endeavour Hills East	55.6
		Gleneagles	57.2
		Endeavour Hills Nth	53.0
		Kilberry Valley	56.9
Location C (Wyndham)	Below average	Derrimut Heath	54.8
		Cambridge	58.9
		The Grange	60.0
		Mossfiel	62.7
		Bellbridge	62.8
Location D (Melton)	Below average	Wedge Park	54.4
		Westmelton	56.3
		Coburn	57.7
		Melton	60.1
		Melton Central	61.2
		Kurunjang	62.4
		Melton Sth	64.0
Location E (Delahey)	Above average	Delahey	72.5
Location F (Meadow Heights)	Above average	Meadow Heights	74.6
		Bethal	76.1
Location G (Craigieburn)	Below average	Craigieburn Sth	56.8
		Craigieburn	58.9

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census Basics, 2001 and Australian Electoral Commission.

* 27 per cent of persons living in the Melbourne Statistical Division in 2001 were born in NESB countries.

Most booths located in areas labelled as 'Above average' NESB have more than 40 per cent of nearby residents born in NESB countries.

Most booths located in areas labelled as 'Below average' NESB have less than 20 per cent of nearby residents born in NESB countries.

trations. The lower Labor vote is consistent with the hypothesis under consideration.

Nevertheless, it is puzzling why Labor is so strong in the seat of Lalor which contains the Melton and Wyndham areas (areas D and C). As Figure 1 shows, Lalor is exceptional in that the TPP vote for Labor is much higher than would be expected given the low NESB concentration in the electorate. The answer probably relates to the strength of Labor traditions in the western suburbs and the fact most of those moving to the outer reaches of the area come from the inner-western suburbs where they would have imbibed the habit of Labor voting.

The 2004 federal election — Sydney

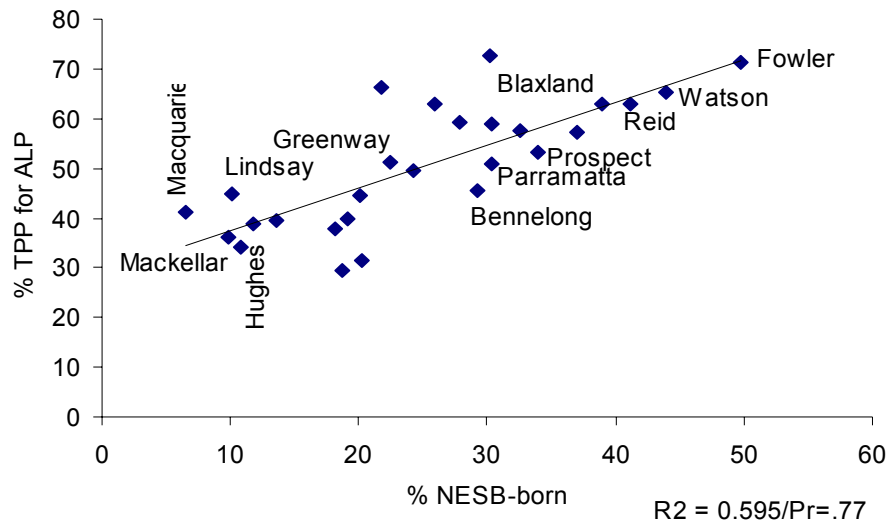
Sydney remained a huge problem for Labor at the 2004 federal election. As indicated, Labor lost several outer suburban Sydney seats in 1996. It has not recovered any of these seats in the three

elections since that time. These outlying seats are distinctive for the predominance of Australia-born residents.

With the exceptions of Sydney and Grayndler, Labor’s remaining seats in Sydney all feature high concentrations of ethnic voters, predominantly drawn from blue- and lower white-collar occupations. Figure 4 shows how close the relationship is between the residential distribution of NESB residents and TPP electoral support for Labor. At the electoral division level, it plots the relationship between support for the ALP at the 2004 federal election and the proportion of the residential population born in NESB countries (2001 Census).

The group of electoral divisions located towards the top right-hand side of the distribution in Figure 4 includes those electorates located to the south-west of metropolitan Sydney. These are Labor strongholds with particularly high rates of NESB-born persons. Conversely, those to

Figure 4: Per cent population born in NESB countries 2001 by TPP vote for ALP 2004, metropolitan Commonwealth Electoral Divisions, Sydney



the bottom left, with relatively low NESB populations, include four of the six electoral divisions lost by Labor at the 1996 election: Macquarie, Hughes, Mackellar and Lindsay.

Labor may have lost some votes to the Coalition in 2004 in these low NESB seats because of the mortgage factor. But the underlying voting pattern towards the Coalition is more likely to be attributable to Labor's deeper loss of connection to these voters. As argued earlier, this is partly attributable to their alienation from Labor's social and cultural agenda. We document this point further below through a comparison of suburban areas of Sydney with similar occupational and mortgage characteristics, but with different birthplace patterns.

The electorates of Grayndler and Sydney do not fit the pattern of close association between the NESB proportion of voters and the Labor vote. The reason is that these are inner suburban areas with high concentrations of middle-class professionals. The Greens received 21 per cent of the primary vote in both electorates. On the TPP vote, Labor won every booth in both electorates.

It follows from our hypothesis that, if the underlying demography of an area is changing from non-ethnic to ethnic or *vice versa*, it would influence voting outcomes. This point is investigated with reference to the seats of Greenway and Parramatta, which were the only two seats in Sydney which changed hands at the 2004 election (Parramatta had been held by the Coalition and was won by Labor; Greenway had been held by Labor and was won by the Coalition).

Figure 4 shows that Greenway and Parramatta fall mid-range between the birthplace poles. If, as was the case for these two seats, they were held by only very narrow margins, then even a minor

increase or decrease in the NESB-born voting population in such mid-range electorates could easily tip the balance in favour of either Labor or the Coalition respectively.

This appears to have been the case with Parramatta. Between 1996 and 2001, the proportion of residents born in NESB countries in Parramatta increased from 26.4 to 30.1 per cent. In our previous research, it was pointed out that the proportion of overseas-born persons living in the Local Government Area of Parramatta (a major part of the seat of Parramatta) was increasing rapidly, partly because the area was an important settlement point for new migrants and partly because of a substantial exodus of Australia-born and main-English-speaking background (MESB) persons. On this basis, we predicted: 'that Labor could well regain this seat at the next election'.¹⁹ This is not to say that other factors may not have been important, including the embarrassing revelations about the infidelity of the sitting Liberal member, who also happened to be an outspoken advocate of 'family values'.

Labor's loss of Greenway occurred despite a marginal increase in the proportion of NESB residents between 1996 and 2001, from 23.1 to 24.0 per cent.²⁰ Although Labor's share of the vote in Greenway had been in decline between 1996 and 2001, an additional factor in 2004, consistent with the present hypothesis, may have been the contrasting ethnic appeal of the major party candidates. In stark contrast to Labor's Muslim unionist candidate, the Liberal Party ran a popular member of a local Christian church. Although the Liberal candidate only took the seat from Labor by a narrow margin on a TPP basis, Labor suffered a seven per cent swing against it on a first preference basis.²¹

Booth level results

The link between the concentration of NESB voters and support for Labor, observed above at the electoral division level, is clear at the polling booth level within metropolitan Sydney. This is illustrated below by selected polling booth results from Western and Southwest Sydney. These booth results reveal that

local areas which had high proportions of NESB voters are associated with relatively high TPP outcomes for Labor. In contrast, those local areas with relatively low levels of NESB voters had markedly lower levels of support for Labor. In Table 3, examples

Table 3: Selected Sydney Commonwealth Electoral Divisions and selected booth level TPP results for the Australian Labor Party at the 2004 federal election

Commonwealth electoral division	Suburban area	High/low NESB *	Booth	TPP vote for ALP (%)	
Parramatta	Harris Park	High	Macarthur High	50.8	
		High	Rowland Hassall	58.3	
		High	Parramatta North	60.4	
	Winston Hills	Low	Parramatta North	56.4	
		Low	Winston Hills	45.9	
		Low	Winston Hills South	45.9	
	Ermington	Low	Low	Winston Heights	40.5
			Low	Ermington Central	51.4
		Low	Low	Ermington West	54.8
			Low	Ermington	50.2
Greeway	Blacktown	High	Blacktown North	49.4	
		High	Seven Hills West	55.2	
		High	Oldfield Road	57.2	
	Kings Langley	Low	Oldfield Road	56.4	
		Low	Kings Langley	41.2	
	Riverstone	Low	Low	Kings Langley North	37.5
			Low	Riverstone East	39.4
		Low	Low	Riverstone	48.1
			Low	Riverstone	48.1
			Low	Scholfields	41.0
Prospect	Fairfield	High	Fairfield Heights	57.1	
		High	Fairfield North	65.4	
		High	Fairfield South	69.7	
		High	Fairvale High	68.1	
		High	Fairfield West	64.1	
	St Clair	Low	Fairfield West	64.8	
		Low	Clairgate	48.4	
	Greystanes	Low	Low	Banks Drive	51.0
			Low	Greystanes	49.4
		Low	Low	Banks	54.2
			Low	Banks	54.2
			Low	Holroyd	48.7
Banks	Riverwood	High	Riverwood North	51.1	
		High	Hannons Road	69.0	
	Peakhurst	Low	Hannons Road	62.3	
		Low	Oatley (Banks)	45.0	
	Milperra	Low	Oatley West	42.9	
		Low	Mortdale West	50.2	
		Low	Milperra	43.3	

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census Basics, 2001 and Australian Electoral Commission.

* High is > 36 % NESB-born; Low is < 20 % NESB-born

30 % of residents in the Sydney Statistical Division were born in NESB countries in 2001.

are presented from the Commonwealth Electoral Divisions of Parramatta, Greenway, Prospect and Banks.

Although the strength of this relationship varies between electorates, a clear pattern emerges. At the booth level, there is a strong association between support for Labor and the proportion of persons born in NESB countries. The electoral division of Prospect provides a particularly clear example. Here, booths located in neighbourhoods with more than 40 per cent of residents born in NESB countries (mostly in Fairfield) yielded Labor more than 60 per cent of the TPP vote. By contrast, booths in neighbourhoods with much lower proportions of NESB residents, for example in St Clair and Greystanes, where the proportion of NESB-born was less than 20 per cent in most neighbourhoods, delivered considerably lower TPP results for Labor — only in the vicinity of 48 to 54 per cent, respectively.

Controlling for occupation and mortgage commitment

If Labor's loss at the 2004 federal election was due to fear of interest rate increases by voters with mortgage commitments, local differences in birthplace composition should have been relatively inconsequential to TPP voting outcomes.

Figure 5 shows four Sydney suburban fringe locations which have been chosen to test the mortgage hypothesis. All four locations have higher proportions of male blue-collar workers and higher proportions of mortgaged dwellings than does the Sydney Statistical Division. However, locations B, C, and D have significantly lower proportions of residents born in NESB countries than does Sydney as a whole. By contrast, location A has much higher proportions of NESB-born persons.²²

Table 4 compares the booth results for these areas for the 2004 federal election. The high ethnic areas delivered a big

Figure 5: Sydney, selected locations with above average proportion of males in blue-collar occupations and above average proportion of dwellings mortgaged, but with contrasting levels of NESB-born residents, 2001

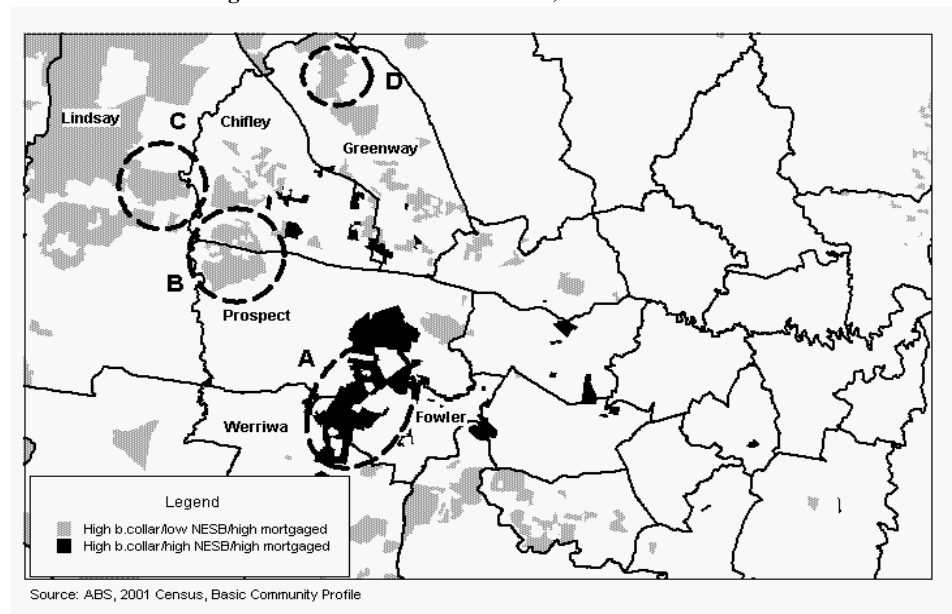


Table 4: TPP results for the Australian Labor Party for selected Sydney areas with above average proportion of dwellings mortgaged and above average male blue-collar workforce, but contrasting levels of residents born in NESB countries, 2004 federal election

	Above/ below average NESB-born *	Booth	TPP for ALP
Location A (Straddles Commonwealth Electoral Divisions of Fowler, Werriwa and Prospect)	Above average	Bonnyrigg	78.0
		Heckenberg	75.0
		Busby	74.5
		Wakeley	69.8
		Green Valley Nth	68.9
		Bonnyrigg Heights	67.9
		St Johns High	65.1
		Hinchinbrook	62.5
		Hinchinbrook Nth	61.7
		Governor Philip King	61.3
Location B (Straddles Commonwealth Electoral Divisions of Chifley and Prospect)	Below average	Mt Druitt Sth	56.2
		Oxley Park	55.2
		St Marys South	53.9
		Bennett Road	53.5
		Blackwell	51.2
		St Clair	51.1
		Banks Drive	51.0
		Erskine Park	48.9
		Clairgate	48.4
Location C (Commonwealth Electoral Division of Lindsay)	Below average	Werrington	55.6
		Cambridge Park	53.5
		Werrington County	52.6
		Kingswood Park	51.2
		Cambridge Park South	50.4
		Penrith	50.2
		Cambridge Gardens	46.9
		Penrith South	46.5
		Kingswood South	46.1
Location D (Commonwealth Electoral Division of Greenway)	Below average	Riverstone	48.1
		Scholfields	41.0
		Riverstone East	39.4

Source: Australian Electoral Commission

* 30 per cent of persons living in the Sydney Statistical Division in 2001 were born in NESB countries. Most booths located in areas labelled as 'Above average' NESB have more than 40 per cent of nearby residents born in NESB countries. Most booths located in areas labelled as 'Below average' NESB have less than 20 per cent of nearby residents born in NESB countries.

majority to Labor. By contrast, the lower ethnic areas gave a 50/50 split. Yet, all were blue collar, mortgaged areas. The difference appears to be the ethnic make up.

Affluent NESB constituencies

As indicated earlier, the association between NESB birthplace and Labor voting does not hold in white-collar communities.

For example, the affluent northern Sydney electorates of Bennelong, Bradfield and North Sydney have significant concentrations of persons of Chinese ancestry. An examination of voting outcomes in booths in these electorates indicates that the strength of the link between birthplace and support for Labor is only weakly expressed compared with many lower-socio-economic areas. Table 5 illustrates this.

There has been some recent commentary by the electoral expert Malcolm Mackerras that the Prime Minister, John Howard, may find his seat of Bennelong threatened by a shift in its western boundary before the next federal election. The threat which Mackerras perceives is that the seat will include part of Parramatta and thus favour Labor.²³ However, Howard's hold on his seat is unlikely to be challenged by such a move. The Labor vote was low in the booths abutting the north-east of the electoral division of Parramatta, which is

host to significant concentrations of better-off NESB-born minorities. Therefore, a westward shift of the Bennelong boundary in this area will not increase Labor's vote.

In the south-east corner of Parramatta (Ermington), which abuts the western boundary of Bennelong, there is a below average representation of NESB residents. However, these booths do support Labor, though by small margins. The three Ermington polling booths delivered 50.2, 51.4 and 54.8 per cent TPP support for Labor in 2004 (See Table 3 above).

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the 2004 election Labor held just 60 out of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives. Of these, 16 were located in Melbourne and 14 in Sydney. The majority were in areas with high concentrations of NESB voters.

The reason why Labor has a greater electoral presence in Melbourne than in Sydney is an artefact of electoral

Table 5: Selected affluent Sydney electoral divisions, Booth results near locations with a high incidence of residents indicating Chinese ancestry at the 2001 Census

Commonwealth Electoral Division	Booth	% TPP to ALP
Bradfield		31.5
	Chatswood	44.6
	Chatswood North	45.4
	Chatswood East	43.1
	Willoughby North	37.3
	Willoughby	34.3
Bennelong		45.7
	Eastwood	50.9
	Denistone	48.2
	Eastwood West	41.2
	Denistone East	46.6
	Eastwood Heights	46.6
North Sydney		40.0
	Artarmon	44.5
	Artarmon Central	47.0
	North Sydney	42.4
	Kirribilli	40.5

Source: Australian Electoral Commission: Customised 2001 Census matrix held by Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University

Note: In many neighbourhoods near these booths the proportion of persons indicating Chinese ancestry was between 10 and 30 per cent in 2001.

geography. The NESB-born voting population is dispersed in a way that maximises the impact of their preference for Labor (relative to Sydney).

These findings suggest that, while fear of mortgage rate increases may have had some influence at the 2004 election, it was not the decisive factor, as has been claimed by many commentators. Notwithstanding a generalised shift against Labor, many mortgage-belt areas with high proportions of NESB-born persons continued to vote strongly for Labor.

Can Labor escape from its acute dependence on the NESB constituency? The problem is that Labor's reliance on this constituency, as well as on the urban intelligentsia, appears to contribute to its loss of support amongst the native-born blue- and lower white-collar voters.

Labor might improve its electoral situation if the next election were to be fought on class issues (jobs, interest rates, welfare and education) rather than cultural issues. However, even if the election were fought on class issues such an improvement would not be easy. Mark Latham's experience is salutary. Latham offered a policy agenda largely free of the social and cultural priorities of left-liberal elites. Yet he made no progress in the suburban seats we have been discussing. It will take more than the efforts of any given leader over one pre-election period to shake public perceptions of where Labor stands on fundamental social and cultural issues.

Glover and some other left-wing commentators argue that blue- and lower white-collar voters have been morally corrupted by a Coalition scare campaign on issues connected to Australian sovereignty. The implication is that, once the nature of Coalition's campaign has been exposed, Labor can regain the electoral ascendancy. An alternative

explanation is that Labor has not yet been able to come up with a platform that actually appeals to the legitimate social and cultural needs of the mainstream voters it has alienated. If Labor were able to articulate a policy agenda which emphasised the interests of a broad spectrum of Australians, including their needs for job opportunities, education and training, and downplay ethnic-minority identification — as Latham was beginning to do — it may win back some of the mainstream blue- and white-collar voting constituency.

If Labor is to break the Coalition's reign, it must bridge the gulf between Labor elites and mainstream voters. The outer-eastern electorate of Aston in Melbourne provides a clear illustration of this gulf. The electorate is a modest suburban area that, prior to 1996, was held by Labor. Also, as Figure 1 shows, the proportion of the population which was born in NESB countries was relatively low. As Figure 1 shows, Labor's share of the TPP vote was lower in Aston than in any other Melbourne seat. Labor did not win one booth in Aston.

If Labor cannot do better than this in such a seat, it is hard to see how it will regain government. There are many more such seats than there are seats where the growing class of social professionals could help Labor. Labor has consolidated its hold on the inner city electorates of Melbourne, Grayndler and Sydney where this class is influential. But Labor will not win government by appealing to this constituency or to the ethnic voters who are now so influential in keeping the party alive elsewhere in Melbourne and Sydney.

Acknowledgement

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