

A fight to the end: Australian Elections 2010

**Por Florencia Quinteros*

Overseeing the Australian election campaign one could conclude that it truly was a battle to the very end, in which there was an unruly sense of tension and anticipation in the air as 14 million citizens were called to cast their compulsory vote on 21st of August, for the 27th Prime Minister of Australia. The true encounter held between the two traditional front running parties that possessed two flawed leaders.

The ALP (Australian Labor Party) the centre left party, who held power from 2007- 2010, faced a recent internal crisis not seen since 1991, a *party room coup*. The previous Prime Minister Kevin Rudd sworn in, in 2007 was overthrown on the 23rd of June 2010 due to months of dramatic losses in public support and key factions required to sustain his leadership. Key decisions made by the leader such as the controversial resource super profits tax, the global emissions trading scheme, endless broken promises and extravagant spending, all contributed enormously in the decline of voter's approval towards the leader.

Consequently this descending dissatisfaction caused severe instability within the party itself and resulted in communication of an internal leadership ballot that would be held by the Labor party caucus, forcing a choice to be made of whether to continue behind Rudd's reign as leader, or choose Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard as their representative. Rudd was beaten by a landslide and overnight Gillard replaced him, becoming the first female Prime Minister of Australia. She held this temporary role into the elections for eight weeks and three days while also holding the position of actual contender, representing the Labor Party for the honourable title. After this replacement she commented on various occasions that she could not truly consider herself Prime Minister until she was voted so democratically by the people.

The LPA (Liberal Party of Australia) is the self proclaimed centre right party; who demonstrated far more stability as a whole during the campaign although its leader Tony Abbott was highly questioned. Abbott, a previous Minister for Employment Services, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations & Minister for Health and Aging came to be leader of the Liberals in December of 2009. Voting took place between Malcolm Turnbull (ex Minister for Environment and Water Resource) and himself for the role, as the previous leader (ex Prime Minister John Howard) refused to go into another election. After Howard's departure and refusal to run for another election, Abbott won the previously mentioned internal elections by only one point and thus was chosen to lead the party into the 2010 elections.

As the elections were called rather abruptly after the crumbling of the Labor Party, both parties were forced to present strong and structured strategies on their ideas for the growth and prosperity of the nation. The main issues on

debate were climate change, economic management, taxation, population policy, asylum seekers, health, and the national broadband network.

The Labor Party focused its agenda on “moving Australia forward” as their slogan stated by “talking to the Australian people in this campaign about how our nation can seize the opportunities of the future”. Gillard and her team claimed this was possible through: a health reform, advancing the national health and hospital system; “a tax plan for our future” entailing the reinvestment of profits made in the commodities boom of non renewable resources; an enhanced superannuation plan; the creation of a national curriculum based on specific subjects and the building of “better regional cities”.

On the other hand, the coalition, apart from dictating their ideas on further productivity and positive changes for the country used scare tactics and the fact that Labour was unstable to their advantage. This worked to their benefit to a certain degree as many individuals were disappointed and confused with the decisions of the Labor Party.

Leering closer to the election dates figures began to show that Gillard was mounting a strong campaign, and although coming in from behind she won many votes during the campaign. Labors transformation was working in its favour as it held a 42% approval rating as opposed to that of the Liberals a 38%. Gillard's personal approval rating was also many points higher than that of Abbotts, who has the lowest approval ratings since he became liberal leader. These percentages, when Gillard became contender, were entirely opposed as Labors change of leader was illustrated through a massive drop in support.

On the 21st of August, voters headed to the polls but this was not even close to the end of this nail biting election. The results slowly began to illustrate that votes were tied as Labor possessed 73 seats and Liberal 72 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives. No party held a majority (more than 76 seats) of which is required to guarantee a win. Labor needed to gain two votes and Liberal three from the independents in order to assure victory. This began a long and tedious negotiation period between the parties and the independents in order to certify their loyalty to either party that lasted weeks. It was the first hung elections in decades for the nation, as no party had majority over the opposition.

Although voting is compulsory statistics post election showed that almost a million Australians decided not to vote and of those who did, around 730,000 chose to vote informally thus their vote was cancelled. Many questioned whether or not Gillard had made an error in deciding to set elections only five weeks after becoming the official candidate. Such prompt campaigns were not usual in Australian politics. Four vital independent votes were needed to reach the House of Representatives seats required. After 17 days of “political deadlock” the votes were locked, 76 for Labor and 74 for Liberal. The result: Julia Gillard was officially sworn in as the first female Prime Minister of Australia on the 14th of September.

Gillard proudly stated after her win, “I have big ambitions for this country”. During her first 100 days as Prime Minister she has re launched the climate

change debate and is currently on her first international trip, attending the Asia-Europe Meeting in Brussels which is the first of four conferences the Prime Minister will be attending in the coming weeks where we will see her abilities on the international scene as leader.

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