

'Fog of War' Marks Campaign as Australia Re-elects Leadership

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Body

Prime Minister John Howard and his conservative government won a third term today in national elections that focused on security and immigration issues.

Mr. Howard, 62, who took a hard-line stance against illegal immigration and emphasized his support for the American-led war against terrorism, won with an increased majority, according to counts by election officials and computer projections by news media analysts.

With 80 percent of the vote counted, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that Mr. Howard's Liberal Party had won 67 seats in the 150-seat lower house of Parliament. Its junior coalition partner, the National Party, won 12 seats, giving them a majority. The rival Labor Party, led by Kim Beazley, 52, a former defense minister, won 65 seats, the network reported.

Australians also chose lawmakers for 40 of the 76 seats in the Senate.

Mr. Beazley, who has led his party for six years, conceded defeat and withdrew from the leadership, saying, "We fought in the adverse circumstances of the fog of war."

The re-election of the Howard government will consolidate Australia's cordial official links with the United States. "All of us are deeply conscious of the changes that have come over the world and therefore over our nation since the terrible events in the United States of Sept. 11," Mr. Howard said.

Labor's promises for modest improvements in health, education, tax and welfare programs were not enough to oust a government that oversaw six years of general economic progress.

A clear majority of the 12 million voters approved of Mr. Howard's prompt commitment of a 1,500-strong Australian force to support the American war effort in Afghanistan and also of his recent refusal to grant asylum to nearly 2,000 refugees from Muslim countries.

Elected to Parliament in 1972, Mr. Howard is the fourth Australian prime minister to win a third term. He is perceived as being more conservative than many of his colleagues on issues like reconciliation with the Aborigines, the indigenous black minority, and the nation's evolution to a republic, severing ceremonial ties to the British monarchy.

His foreign policy priority will be to improve relations with neighboring Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, which has been accused of tolerating smugglers that ferry Muslim refugees and economic migrants into Australian waters.

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Throughout the five-week election campaign, reports of the 2,000 asylum seekers on about a dozen boats that were turned back by the navy or shipped to detention camps, received extensive coverage, reinforcing the government's emphasis on border protection and overshadowing Labor's focus on social reforms.

The Labor Party held a slim advantage in opinion polls until August when Mr. Howard's rating surged by 15 percentage points after he refused entry to the asylum seekers. Most were refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and other Muslim countries seeking asylum in Australia.

Australia grants only three-year "temporary protection" visas to unauthorized arrivals deemed to be genuine refugees but gives full rights to about 12,000 United Nations-authorized refugees each year.

About 1,200 candidates from three mainstream parties and three minor groups, including environmentalist and watchdog activists, sought election to the House of Representatives where the government had held a seven-seat margin since re-election in 1998.

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