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## **IR is a vote changer at next poll**

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Even high-income earners are deeply uneasy about the Howard Government's **workplace** changes GLENN MILNE

THE first detailed survey on voter response to **John Howard's** radical **industrial** relations reforms will shock the Government. The Coalition was expecting a backlash from ordinary workers.

What this poll shows is that high-income earners are also profoundly worried that the changes go too far.

Not only that, it concludes the issue is a vote changer. The poll of almost 2000 respondents was conducted by the Association of Professionals, Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia. Its 42,000 membership also includes architects, IT professionals, pharmacists and veterinarians.

The membership embraces both the private and public sectors and many are already on individual contracts.

The survey showed the respondents were deeply troubled about the Government's WorkChoices package. In particular:

\* 76.9 per cent were concerned or very concerned about the reduction in the powers of the Australian **Industrial** Relations Commission.

\* 75.7 per cent were concerned or very concerned about the reduction in the range of matters that can be covered in awards and enterprise agreements.

\* 72.3 per cent were concerned or very concerned about the removal of the no disadvantage test for Australian **Workplace** Agreements that used to give them precedence over awards or enterprise agreements.

The research also asked respondents who they supported at the last election, and whether the IR changes were likely to shift their votes at the next election.

At the 2004 poll 35.7 per cent voted Liberal, 37.7 per cent Labor and 2 per

cent voted for the National Party. So this is not a pro-Labor professional association, an important point to be taken on board when analysing the significance of the results.

When asked the likelihood that the **industrial** relations issue could change their vote at the next election, 19.2 per cent of Coalition voters said that was very likely and 9.6 per cent said they were likely to change their vote. In other words, a sizeable 28.8 per cent said they were likely or very likely to change their vote on the IR issue at the next election.

The demographic of the people who returned the survey is also significant, and alarming for the Government:

- \* 23.4 per cent are on individual contracts, and 6 per cent are on AWAs.
- \* Nearly half are in the private sector.
- \* 27 per cent earn between \$60,000 and \$80,000.
- \* 28 per cent earn between \$80,000 and \$100,000.
- \* 26 per cent earn more than \$100,000.

The poll was conducted by John Armitage, director of Auspoll, who also doubles as pollster for the Victorian ALP. ``Even if only a third of those who said they would change their vote actually do, the Government would still lose the election on this issue," he says. ``This survey shows that a wide cross-section of the public is concerned, and that if engineers, professionals and other white-collar qualified people will change their vote, then the Government has got real problems in unexpected territory."

The APESMA survey is even more worrying for the Government when it is seen in the context of the actual number of votes that are needed to shift for a change of government to occur. While the Coalition has a 20-plus seat majority in the House of Representatives it's a deceptive buffer. When you understand that only 28,609 people in key seats need to change their vote for Labor to win the next election, suddenly **Kim Beazley's** task looks a lot easier.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine that number of voters being frightened by the Government's IR reforms. Especially when you consider analysis produced by Opposition treasury spokesman **Wayne Swan**.

According to Swan's research, 1.4 million people are now reliant on an award and therefore on minimum wage determinations. They face potentially lower real wages based on the determinations of the new so-called Fair Pay Commission. That's 20 per cent of the workforce.

Almost 3 million people regularly working overtime face the loss of penalty rates. And the 4.2 million working in medium to small workplaces will be easier to sack under the Government's unfair dismissal laws. And just for good measure, throw in the 2.2 million casual workers who face a cut in leave loading when they renegotiate or change jobs.

Putting together Swan's figures and the APESMA survey, the conclusion has to be that Howard has scored an unlikely double: his IR reforms are eating away at the coalition of interests that have thus far sustained him in office. At one end the voters he calls ``Howard's battlers" are likely to desert him because of their **industrial** weakness. At the other end, high-income earners appear to have decided the changes are fundamentally unfair. As Swan points out, it doesn't matter how much money you earn, most people are worried about the vulnerability of their children under the new regime.

No wonder senior government figures concede the disastrous ad campaign promoting the changes is unlikely to come back. All it did was raise awareness of an issue about which the electorate is profoundly troubled.

Ultimately, that turned it into a \$55 million campaign that benefited Labor. In sport, that's known as an own goal.

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