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## **IR delivers Labor big poll lead**

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LABOR has moved into a decisive election-winning position as nervous voters turn on John Howard and his Government's workplace reforms.

Kim Beazley has received a significant boost as he battles the Government's industrial relations laws, with Labor surging to 53per cent support on a two-party-preferred basis.

In a big shift in voter sentiment, the Coalition's primary vote has slumped to 40 per cent while Labor's has jumped to 41per cent and satisfaction with the way Mr Howard is doing his job has dropped to its lowest rating in eight months.

As Coalition MPs contemplate a possible leadership change later this year, the Prime Minister's approval rating has taken a nosedive just days after his return from his latest overseas trip.

More voters now disapprove of Mr Howard's performance than praise his work -- the first time he has hit negative ratings since February.

Labor would have easily won an election held last weekend, according to the latest Newspoll, conducted exclusively for The Australian.

The poor result also coincides with the July 1 introduction of tax cuts, which came into effect on Saturday.

The turnaround for the Opposition Leader comes a month after he promised to scrap individual work contracts if Labor won the next election.

That promise was amplified last week when the **ACTU** organised well-attended protest rallies across Australia during a national day of action.

At the same time, the peak union body continued a well-funded advertising campaign on television, sending a potent message directly into the living rooms of mainstream Australia.

Union figures believe the campaign to overturn the Government's IR changes is starting to have an effect in the Coalition's heartland. It has also

helped Mr Beazley overcome perceptions that he does not stand for anything.

Labor, trying to win office after 10 years in Opposition, will be buoyed by the Newspoll result.

Mr Beazley has pledged to tear up the Government's workplace reforms, which make it easier for bosses to sack workers and undermine the role of unions in negotiating wages and conditions. He has also seized on a raft of horror stories flowing from the Government's new industrial laws amid concerns the changes have undermined employees' capacity to bargain, particularly with rogue bosses.

The Labor leader has also closed the gap as preferred prime minister, although Mr Howard remains the voters' favoured choice.

While Mr Beazley has been hitting the hustings to drum home his IR message, Mr Howard spent last week on another overseas visit, to Indonesia and China. The Prime Minister was criticised by some in Australia for being seen to kowtow to Jakarta, following Indonesian protests over Canberra's decision to grant visas to 42 Papuan separatists.

Mr Howard's trip to the resort island of Batam to meet Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and a later meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, have done little to improve his approval rating.

International diplomacy also failed to lift the Coalition's support. Instead, its primary vote dropped to 40 per cent, compared with 46.7 per cent registered at the 2004 election and down 4 per cent from the previous fortnight.

The Government has looked ratty in recent weeks and there is speculation that Mr Howard will soon undertake a limited reshuffle of his front bench.

Nationals leader Mark Vaile is expected to vacate the trade portfolio, once the current world trade talks are completed.

In contrast, Labor's solid campaign against the Government, particularly on industrial relations, appears to be resonating with voters. Its primary vote moved up three percentage points to 41 per cent.

The Liberal Party dropped to 35 per cent, while the Nationals were steady on 5 per cent.

The Greens were a little softer, dropping from 7 per cent to 5 per cent, while independents and other parties secured 14 per cent of voter support.

Public approval for Mr Howard slumped during the same period. Satisfaction with the Prime Minister's performance dropped seven percentage points, to 43 per cent, his lowest rating since December last year.

Dissatisfaction increased to 47 per cent, suggesting Mr Howard missed out on any national outpouring of warmth over the Socceroos' impressive World Cup performance.

While he remains comfortably ahead of Mr Beazley as preferred prime minister, the gap has narrowed considerably. He had consistently held a 30 percentage point advantage, but Mr Howard now rates at 49 per cent to Mr

Beazley's 29 per cent.

On a more sombre note for Mr Beazley, he has failed to make any real headway with voters. His own satisfaction rating remains soft and static, at 32 per cent. And half the voters polled are still dissatisfied with his performance, highlighting the need for continuing improvement.

The poll comes as MPs canvass the views of voters during the long parliamentary winter recess.

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