

IR is the real issue – not Howard Vs Costello

By Michele Levine, CEO Roy Morgan Research

On the weekend of July 8/9, after weeks of discussion and concern about IR changes, and the Morgan Poll showing the [Labor Party held a seven-point two-party preferred lead over the Coalition \(53.5% of 46.5%\)](#), former Liberal Minister Ian McLachlan revealed details about the alleged 1994 “deal”.

As pointed out in my 2004 paper, [‘The Mood of the Electorate and the Federal Election’](#), the best way to find out what people think or how they feel about a particular issue is by asking them. And this is exactly what we did last week following the Liberal Leadership confrontation between Prime Minister John Howard and the increasingly impatient Treasurer Peter Costello.

Roy Morgan Research surveyed electors on who they prefer as Leader of the Coalition and who they thought would be the better Prime Minister – John Howard or Kim Beazley, and Peter Costello or Kim Beazley and why. [The findings were clear](#). As of today Mr Howard is ahead of Mr Costello in the eyes of the electorate¹. Mr Howard’s experience over many years was frequently mentioned in special qualitative research by those who preferred him as Prime Minister – *“He’s got the runs on the board, so to speak, and this experience generates trust”, “He’s really proved himself”, “John Howard is a proven performer”, “John Howard has kept the country on the right track, it’s gone forward with him”, “John Howard has more experience and makes the tough decisions when they need to be made”*. [As Gary Morgan said](#) *“It is clear he has built and maintained significant trust with electors”*.

However, the ‘sleeper’ remains the public’s response to the Government’s Industrial Relations reforms. Analysis of the electorate’s qualitative response to the Leadership questions revealed that despite the recent focus on leadership, IR issues are not far from the electorate’s mind. The Roy Morgan qualitative data suggests the Federal Government’s Industrial Relations reforms give Kim Beazley room to manoeuvre, regardless of who he comes up against in the next Federal election: Many of those who preferred Mr Beazley over Mr Howard as Prime Minister gave reasons such as:

“Beazley has promised to get rid of the IR laws.”

“The IR laws are ridiculous. They’ve gone too far.”

“I disagree with Howard’s IR laws and his immigration policies.”

“I believe John Howard is arrogant and conservative in his views. I have real issues with the ‘children overboard’ issue and the war in Iraq and more recently with IR.”

¹ Mr Howard (43%) is ahead of Mr Costello (17%) in the eyes of the electorate as the preferred Coalition Leader. On the question of who would make the better Prime Minister Mr Howard is preferred over Mr Beasley (61% Vs 34%) while Mr Beazley is preferred over Mr Costello (48% Vs 41%).

“Howard has put the working people back 100 years by doing away with the IR laws – I’m strongly against what he’s done.”

There is little doubt IR will be a major election issue and while it remains to be seen how much effect Mr Howard’s new IR laws will have on [productivity and employment](#), there is a deep-seated concern and fear among some electors as to how the new IR laws will [affect their employment](#).