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AUSTRALIA: FEATURE

Expat Australians targeted at election

By Gary Cox

CANBERRA, Oct 30 (**Reuters**) - Australia's political leaders are putting the hard word on Australians living abroad to stand up and be counted in a razor-edge November 10 election.

With opposition Labor only needing an 0.8 percent swing nationally to seize power from the Liberal/National government, the votes of 620,000 expatriate Australians could be key in a long list of marginal seats held by just a few hundred votes.

Centre-left Labor, battling to escape more than five years in opposition, is actively targeting big numbers of Australians living in London, urging them to cast votes at Australia House in the Strand where 20,000 people voted in the last 1998 ballot.

Labor's London-based team of volunteers is pushing the party's message in media advertisements and at events drawing big Australian crowds in a bid to muster votes from the 200,000 Australians living in and around London.

"Votes posted here may well tip the balance in the same way postal votes played a crucial role in the U.S. election," Labor's British campaign manager Scott Plimpton told Reuters.

"We are trying to convey how close the election will be and how important it is for people to vote."

For although Australians at home must vote or face a A\$20 (\$10) fine, once overseas they can opt out. In 1998 only 65,000, or 10 percent, of expatriates voted in the election which gave Prime Minister John Howard a second term with a wafer-thin majority.

VOLUNTEER DRIVE

Howard's conservative Liberal Party has a London-based branch with volunteers promoting the party and handing out how-to-vote cards to maximise their share of the expected 12.6 million votes at the ballot box next month.

When asked for details of their British campaign, a Liberal party official said the main focus was on voters in Australia, as opinion polls show two-party preferred support for the government sliding from an 11-point lead over Labor to four points.

"Mate, we are too busy worrying about votes at home to think about winning support from voters overseas," a Liberal party official told Reuters.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) said votes taken in London - home to the largest Australian population overseas - could be an important factor but so could the potential impact of votes in any of the 98 other smaller offshore voting centres.

"Every single vote is vital in this election so we need to ensure voting facilities are available to all Australians, even in small numbers because they want to take part and they could make a difference," AEC spokesman Brien Hallett told Reuters.

In contrast to Britain and Hong Kong, which as Australia's second biggest polling station recorded 10,680 votes in 1998, Hamburg in Germany, Barbados, Brazil and Pohnpei in Micronesia all recorded less than 20 votes.

Expatriates can send postal votes back to Australia, to the nearest Australian consulate, or vote in person at any one of 99 overseas polling places globally from October 29 to November 9, the day before voters in Australia cast their ballot.

HURDLES TO VOTE

Anne MacGregor, founder of the expatriate lobby group the Southern Cross, said while voting was possible from remote locations, expatriates were often discouraged by various hurdles to secure the right to vote which caused low voter numbers.

"The law effectively says if you have been away for more than two years or you want to stay away for six years, you don't have the right to vote," the Washington-based lawyer told Reuters.

"If we want real participation, we need a system like America that allows you to enrol and vote as long as you are a citizen, no matter when you left or how long you are away."

Eligible expatriates wanting to vote in next month's election - called on October 5 - had to register as overseas voters by October 15 to ensure they could participate. Although Australian citizens overseas are not required to vote or fined for failing to do so, they are struck off the electoral register if they fail to vote in a single poll.

Tim Keely, an English teacher who has lived in Medan on the Indonesian island of Sumatra for the past year, said he would be sure to vote because it was such a close race.

His ballot will be counted as a postal vote in his home electorate of Canning in Western Australia, one of the country's most marginal seats, held by Labor candidate Jane Gerick.

"You bet I'll be voting this time. Our future depends on it," Keely, a Labor supporter, told Reuters.

"We can't have a government with such bad education and health policies get back in by a whisker and I think the left of politics in Australia needs all the help it can get."

But as several politicians hang on to their seats with tiny margins, there are thousands of Australians who have either been away from home for too long or failed to register in time to have a say in Australia's political future.

"I thought I could vote at the local consulate down the road but I've been knocked off the register and it's too late to get back on," James Stokes, an Australian electrical engineer living in Calgary, Canada, told Reuters.

"I do care but voting from here is just a hassle as it's made so difficult to vote."

(A\$1 = US\$0.50).

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