In the lead up to the 2004 Federal Election the Coalition and Labor are focused on big spending aimed at voter attention. But how much is designed to ensure the long term prosperity for Australians? Economists agree that interest rates in the next few years will differ little under a Coalition or Labor Government. Voters should also consider the issues that get ignored in the policy priorities of the major parties and why smaller parties view them as significant. For more detailed information see the website of each party.

**Issues of Health**

In the area of health there are a number of concerns around the administration of health services and the deteriorating public hospital system. It is imperative that all people have access to adequate and reliable health care, situated in their local area, and accessible to all.

**Coalition:**
- An increase in the Medicare rebate for patients to 100% of the scheduled fee. This will be passed on to patients regardless of whether they bulk bill.
- An additional $5 per visit paid to doctors for those who bulk bill children and those who hold health care cards, plus an incentive for rural areas.
- Safety net amount which is $300 for families who receive family benefits and $700 for singles and couples with no children.
- Additional funds distributed for additional services for those on health care cards such as dental and podiatry.
- “Round the Clock” Medicare program - $393 million over 4 yrs to boost after hrs GP services and increase rebates.

**ALP:**
- $3.4 billion *New Deal to Save Medicare*, a commitment aimed at reversing the decline of bulk billing.
- Immediately increase the patient rebate to 100% of the scheduled fee for every bulk-billed consultation, which is an average increase of $5 per consultation.
- An aim to raise the level of bulk billing to 80% of consultations through cash incentives to doctors who bulk bill 80% of patients in urban areas and 75% in outer metropolitan areas and 70% in rural and remote areas. The cash incentives range from $7500 in cities to $22,500 in rural areas.
- “Medicare Gold” reduced hospital waiting lists and universal hospital cover for senior citizens 75 and over.
- $998 million targeting public hospitals including $472 million for priority needs.
- “Medicare After Hours”- GP clinics and services in public hospitals and in areas identified as necessary.
- Funds to provide up to 1,300,000 extra dental procedures for those on pensions or concession cards, intended to clear existing backlog.
Democrats:
- Provide an equitable, high quality health care system that is accessible to all Australians.
- Prioritise funding to public hospitals and the public system and reject the 30% private health rebate and lifetime cover.
- Encourage bulkbilling, affordable fees and properly fund mental health, Indigenous health and drug rehabilitation services.

Greens:
- Believe the current health system is fragmented and poorly coordinated at state and federal levels.
- Implement a comprehensive national health plan encompassing all areas of health.
- Work towards greater access to high quality health care on the basis of need.
- Indigenous health to be a national priority.

**Issues of Education**

The debate between public and private school funding has escalated since Mark Latham became leader of the ALP. However both Labor and the Coalition have pledged extra funding in the lead up to the election while the Greens have focused particularly on the growing inequity of access to higher education.

Coalition:
- Extra $1 billion over 4yrs for needy government and non-government schools to be distributed from Canberra to school Principals and parent bodies for buildings and grounds, upon direct application, bypassing the States.
- Funding for schools which is tied to school populations and achievements in national benchmarks of literacy and numeracy.
- Increased funding to some systemic catholic schools and independent schools and reduced funding to public schools.

ALP:
- Extra $2.4 billion injection over 5yrs for needy government and non-government schools.
- Disadvantaged schools will have funding to attract teachers and provide resources for professional development.
- Establish a national male mentoring plan.
- Expand the number of university and TAFE places nationally, and funding to assist disadvantaged students to obtain tertiary education.
- Retain HECS fees at the current level for some and reduce those for science courses.
- Provide funds in full community consultation to increase access to higher education for indigenous students and those with a disability.

Democrats:
- Funding for education should be based on educational need.
- Spending on education at least 5% of GDP, with priority for government schools.
- Wage parity for teachers across all states and territories.
- Oppose HECS, PELS and other forms of fees and charges and call for an immediate increase in the current HECS repayment threshold to average male earnings.

Greens:
- Fund the public education system to a level where it can sustain excellence and equity.
- Free government schools and TAFE colleges from the need to compete in the marketplace for funding, students and resources
- Funding models for education that do not disadvantage public education to the benefit of private schooling.
- Redirect $1.5 billion offered to wealthier private schools from the Government to an equity program for public schools serving communities with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Supporting universities as places free from sectional and commercial interests and where critical comment and innovation is encouraged.
- Funding supported for low fee private schools including Catholic Systemic schools.

**Issues of Housing**

Affordable housing is an important issue of concern. The real estate market has shown enormous growth in the past few years, and housing prices have increased across the nation. With increased values of property, it is harder for first time buyers to purchase a house, and rentals will increase as more people are locked out of purchasing their own home.
This intensifies the housing challenge for those who are already vulnerable.

Coalition policies:
- “A strong economy” will keep housing loan interest rates as low as possible.
- No new commitment to the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement favoring rental subsidies rather than increased spending on public housing.

ALP:
- Extra $325 million for Commonwealth State Housing Agreement to address 200,000 people on public housing waiting lists.
- Focus since October 2003 on poverty reduction measures with a new national strategy targeting access to affordable housing.
- Pledged to keep economy in surplus to avoid upward pressure on interest rates.
- A commitment to find new ways of financing an increase in the supply of affordable housing including projects that link housing and employment services.
- $75 million boost for Indigenous housing.

Democrats:
- A national housing strategy to increase the amount of quality affordable rental housing, which also provides community housing and strong management practices.
- To ensure equitable access to housing for all Australians.
- Planning and economic practices at all levels of government to be applied to meet sustainable goals.

Greens:
- Increase the amount of public housing to reduce housing–related poverty.
- Increase tenant participation in decisions about services to be provided.
- Encourage urban villages after community consultation so people can live in ecologically and socially satisfying ways within cities.
- Ensure that people unable to provide for their housing are given assistance by the Government.

Issues of National Security

In recent years national security has become an increasing focus for all political parties. However, the views about international relations and foreign policy are very different. The question to consider when looking at these differences is what is in the national interest and what issues need to be taken into account in the security debate.

Coalition:
- US- Australian alliance “has never been stronger” Full support to Bush Administration on pre-emptive strikes and “conduct of the war on terrorism”. Will work outside UN.
- A commitment to continue funding troops in Iraq while there is a request for their presence.
- A focus on strong border protection.
- New doctrine supports Australian Defence Force operations globally to combat terrorism and WMD threats.

ALP:
- Core approach of “self-reliance” with equal international relationships with the UN, the US Alliance, and co-operation and engagement with Asia- Pacific region.
- Opposed government’s decision to send troops to Iraq because Iraqi issues needed to be resolved through the UN.
- Argues that the Government has made Australians a bigger target because of involvement in the Iraq war.
- Labor Government will withdraw the Australian troops operating in Iraq by Christmas 2004, while taking appropriate security advice concerning the Australian diplomatic mission in Baghdad and act on it.
- Focus on security in the region through co-operation, but doesn’t oppose “time-limited” contributions to far flung deployments.
- Opposed to actions which advance hostility in the Islamic world toward Australia and strengthens the case of extremists.
- Advocates Royal Commission into Intelligence Services and argues that government is told what it wants to hear by spies.
Democrats:

- The decision to send Australian troops to war overseas should be the responsibility of both houses of federal parliament, not of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- While opposing sending troops to Iraq, the Democrats support the UN resolution to rebuild Iraq and the troops remaining there until the job is done according to the UN.
- “More energy strengthening the UN, less energy devising ways to bypass it”.
- Oppose all biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.
- Argues that anti-terrorism laws discriminate against local Muslim population and prevent building links with moderate Muslims to fight extremism.
- Royal Commission into Intelligence agencies. Argues that there is a clear track record of failure and Government misrepresentation of intelligence.

Greens:

- Argues that the World should recognise “legitimate grievances”, both economic and social that “provides fertile breeding ground for terrorists”.
- Condemn use of terrorist threat to attack civil liberties and justify military actions like Iraq.
- The UN to be given a central role in anti-terrorist activities and to prosecute terrorist crimes.
- A UN-sponsored international peace conference on nuclear disarmament.
- Establish and contribute to a permanent UN peacekeeping force.
- Oppose the use of fear of terrorism to justify military actions such as the invasion of Iraq.
- All ADF operations to include a human rights monitoring component.
- Support royal Commission into Intelligence Services.