

Australia: recycled Labor leader says he will act for the wealthy

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Kim Beazley—the man who led the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to two consecutive election defeats in 1998 and 2001, and then resigned—was returned unopposed to Labor’s top job on January 28.

The latest leadership poll followed the resignation of former Labor leader Mark Latham on January 18. Latham quit the job, and left politics altogether, after serving in the position for little more than a year.

The uncontested elevation of Beazley was not the result of any popular support, either inside or outside the ALP. Beazley is remembered by millions of ordinary people for his role as a minister in the Hawke-Keating governments, which, during 13 years of rule from 1983 to 1996, oversaw a fundamental reversal in the social position of the working class. He is also regarded as a militarist, well deserving of the nickname “Bomber Beazley” that he earned while serving as defence minister.

Beazley was simply the last man standing following the decision of Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Kevin Rudd and Labor Health spokesperson Julia Gillard to withdraw from the race. While there is little doubt that both would-be contenders came under considerable internal party pressure to abandon their challenge, the deciding factor was the intervention of the business and media establishment. Once a number of prominent editorials signaled support for the former leader, the other contenders realised the game was up. Labor’s federal caucus would certainly back him.

Like Beazley—who in the lead-up to the January 28 caucus meeting constantly insisted he was “fired with ambition”—both potential challengers were motivated by little more than personal ambition. This was most crudely expressed by Rudd when he announced to the media on January 24 that he was throwing in the towel and proclaimed: “I did not have enough votes to win—it is as simple as that.” He went on to confirm, however, that if he thought for one minute he could have mustered the numbers: “I would be in like Flynn.” “I have a field marshal’s baton in the backpack, it is just that the season is not right to take it out.”

Just two days later, Gillard—who postures as a Labor “left”—also pointed to her inability to get the numbers as the reason for opting out. “The majority have determined to support Kim Beazley,” she declared. Then—possibly with an eye on retaining her position on the front bench, or even winning further advancement—Gillard praised Beazley as “a big man with a big heart and big commitment to the Labor Party.” Her sycophantic support for Beazley was all the more sickening considering it came just two days after she had rightly accused his backers of running a dirty tricks campaign to discourage her from standing.

The most significant feature of this latest tussle for the Labor leadership was the complete lack of any discussion or debate over policy. The unconditional withdrawal by Rudd and Gillard, with the approval of their respective factions, demonstrates yet again that, despite the vicious infighting that permeates every level of the Labor Party, the differences have nothing to do with program, perspective or policy.

None of the factions represents the interests of ordinary working people. All of them subscribe to the right wing and openly pro-market trajectory that the Labor Party has pursued over the last two decades. This is why it never even occurred to Rudd or Gillard to utilise the leadership contest as a platform to elaborate policy differences and fight to win new adherents.

With Beazley installed, the entire Labor leadership is rallying to the demands of the corporate elite and media moguls that the party perpetuate the illusion of providing genuine opposition while deepening its bi-partisan support for the Howard government’s economic and industrial “reform” agenda.

Australian Industry Group chairman Heather Ridout laid out what big business expects. She welcomed Beazley as a man “well known and respected by the business community” and pointed out that “having served in Labor governments that led the economic changes in the 1980s he understands the imperative of reform and the critical need for that process to be ongoing”.

Spelling it out as clearly as possible, Ridout continued:

“The period ahead promises the possibility of extraordinary reform extending from the known agendas of Telstra and workplace relations to other areas including the possibility of further changes to the tax regime and improvements to Federal-State relations.”

Beazley responded promptly. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 3, he made clear that Labor would defend the interests of the corporate elite and the wealthy. While declaring that government should serve “all Australians”, the new Labor leader said that this specifically included those “people who are taking advantage of a good situation we (past Labor governments) created, a 15 year-long economic expansion with rising real estate and share values.”

In other words, Labor must defend the interests of the top 20 percent of the population, the main beneficiaries of the Hawke-Keating “reforms”—including the greatest ever transfer of wealth away from wages, salaries and working conditions into profits.

Little wonder the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran an editorial the next day full of praise for Beazley declaring: “Kim Beazley’s recognition that Labor must focus on the creation of economic wealth, ahead of the question of how it is redistributed, is a welcome statement of intentions.”

As a down payment, Beazley wasted no time in scrapping a series of election pledges made by Labor just months earlier in an attempt to win popular support and harness votes. While making no fundamental change to wealth distribution in the country, the policies had nonetheless riled sections of big business.

Jettisoned were Labor’s “Medicare Gold” policy to provide free medical care for people over 70 and the promise to redirect some government funding away from wealthy private educational institutions to poorer schools. Latham’s conditional commitment to protect some of the old growth Tasmanian forests from logging was also dumped.

Beazley made clear that under no circumstances would Labor challenge the Howard government’s so-called “mandate” following its victory in last October’s general election. While the party remained opposed to the sale of the government’s remaining 50.1 percent controlling share in Telstra—the country’s major communications carrier—he said the sale would be “inevitable” when the Coalition took control of the Senate in July. “They (the government) have the power to order that,” he declared.

Beazley also distanced Labor from the Latham’s highly conditional call last year for the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq. Concerned that the death of Australian airmen Paul Pardoel in Iraq last week could ignite popular demands for troop withdrawal, Beazley declared on Melbourne radio station 3AW: “If I were prime minister

tomorrow...I would firstly have said to the Australian people, look we’ve got diplomats there. They’ve got to be protected and while ever they’re there they’ve got to have Australian troops protecting them.”

As well, he made clear that Labor had no differences with Washington’s ongoing occupation of Iraq and would not make an issue of the fact that both Bush and Howard had blatantly lied to the people to justify the illegal invasion.

Concerned, however, that the worsening situation in Iraq could impact directly on Australia’s pursuit of its colonial ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region, Beazley called on Howard to press the United States “not to become bogged down in a civil war”, saying “If we don’t, those issues which were the original causes of the involvement, however flawed the analysis, which are still nevertheless important issues, are going to be seriously compromised.”

Beazley’s public pronouncements in his first week as leader constitute a green light for the Howard government to press ahead with its pro-market, pro-war agenda. But among broad sections of the population, the government’s deepening offensive will only intensify the growing opposition to social inequality and militarism. Unable to find any expression through official channels—and certainly not through the Labor Party—this discontent will, sooner rather than later, give rise to new social and political movements that will inevitably come into conflict with the entire two-party system. What is needed is an alternative program and party, grounded on socialist internationalism, that advocates the fundamental refashioning of society in the interests of the majority and not the wealthy few. This is the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



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