

Australia: Gillard and Abbott stage sham election debate

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Last night's sole election campaign debate between Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard and opposition Liberal leader Tony Abbott comprised lengthy diatribes by both leaders against refugees and immigrants, and a series of lies and evasions on the world economic crisis, the war in Afghanistan, mounting social hardship, and climate change.

The carefully orchestrated affair, like the official campaign itself, had a vacuous air. Both Gillard and Abbott had been thoroughly coached beforehand by their media and public relations advisers. They both remained "on message" throughout the so-called debate, which was organised around the leaders' opening and closing set statements, interspersed with answers to questions put by three journalists, the *Daily Telegraph*'s Malcolm Farr, Laura Tingle of the *Australian Financial Review*, and the ABC's Chris Uhlmann. In a telling indication of the lack of any real support for either of the major parties, the televised debate had earlier been rescheduled so as to avoid clashing with the popular cooking program "MasterChef".

An editorial in today's *Melbourne Age* summed up the media's reaction to the performance: "The idea of allowing only one nationally televised debate between the prime minister and the opposition leader during an election campaign is, as the *Age* has lamented before, a woeful disservice to democracy. After last night's performance, however, it must also be added: two more debates like that one wouldn't serve democracy any better. It was scarcely a debate at all in the normal meaning of the word ... Australians would have learned little they didn't already know about the choice they must make."

Sydney Morning Herald commentator Jacob Saulwick added: "Having a shot at the vacuity of this election campaign is a little like nuking fish in a barrel, but it is remarkable that fundamental dishonesty lies at the heart of almost all the major policy themes to emerge thus far."

What lies at the heart of this vacuity and dishonesty is the inability of either Labor or Liberal to advance a program of genuine social reform. In a previous period, party leaders would elaborate on specific policies aimed at alleviating social hardship, extending access to welfare, and improving social services and infrastructure, even if the reality proved very different to the rhetoric. No such discussion is possible today, because the central agenda of both parties is to claw back the past social concessions made to the working class, reduce living standards, slash public spending, and open up health and education to the dictates of the market.

There is no public support for these austerity measures and so they are never mentioned. Instead, the campaign becomes dominated by endlessly repeated and politically vapid slogans on the one hand, and by reactionary diversions and scapegoating exercises on the other.

The first question put by the assembled panel of journalists was indicative—Gillard and Abbott were asked if they agreed that "the courage to stand against the mob is a sign of a true leader".

Neither leader demurred at this reference to the "mob". Gillard proudly recalled her confrontation with school teachers over the imposition of the MySchool and NAPLAN standardised testing regime, which aims to further undermine the public education system: "It wasn't easy staring down a strike by teachers... I thought it was the right thing to do and I got it done."

On many issues, the Labor prime minister outflanked Abbott on the right—most notably on corporate tax. Gillard emphasised her pledge to cut the tax rate from 30 to 29 percent, in contrast with the Liberal Party, which plans to maintain the existing rate. She also went on the offensive against Abbott's proposal to issue a 1.7 percent levy on the profits of Australia's 3,200 largest companies in order to fund a \$2.7 billion maternity leave scheme, paying mothers

the equivalent of their full wage for 26 weeks.

Gillard's attack made clear her determination to secure the backing of big business and finance capital. When Abbott announced his maternity leave scheme in March, apparently without consulting any of his Liberal Party colleagues beforehand, it was met with howls of outrage from business and the media. As far as the ruling elite was concerned, the proposal raised serious questions regarding the viability of an Abbott-led government. The Liberal leader nevertheless promoted the scheme during the debate yesterday, no doubt in part because of opinion polls indicating he was trailing Gillard with women voters.

Abbott connected maternity leave to the mounting financial hardship confronting working people. His opening statement began with a reference to "a fair go for families struggling with cost of living pressures" and his knowledge of "what it's like to raise a family, to wrestle with a big mortgage, with grocery bills, with school fees". The empty character of these platitudes was quickly revealed, however, when Abbott was unable to answer a question as to what a Liberal government would do to reduce grocery prices.

The debate was dominated by lengthy exchanges on refugees and immigration. Both leaders, and the assembled journalists, repeatedly referred to stopping "boats". Neither Gillard nor Abbott once referred to international law and the established legal and democratic right of refugees to claim asylum in Australia. Instead they squabbled over whether East Timor or Nauru was a more suitable location for a refugee detention centre. Gillard rightly noted that "it's increasingly true, if we drill right down, there's a fair bit of agreement here" between Labor and Liberal.

On immigration, the two leaders argued over the number of arrivals in the past and forecasts into the future. Gillard again drew deep from the reactionary well of White Australia and Labor Party racism and nationalism. She declared her support for "a sustainable Australia, not a big Australia", and insisted that this was necessary to "protect our Australian way of life ... that's having a job, being able to aspire to own your own home, getting decent service, health and education, having access to wide open spaces".

There was no serious discussion of any of the pressing issues confronting the vast majority of the population.

Neither leader referred to the global economic crisis in their opening or closing statements. In response to the sole question raised about it, Gillard merely acknowledged

"fragilities and some troubling signs" internationally, before boasting of the impact of Labor's stimulus spending measures. The reality is that the Australian economy was one of the few advanced capitalist economies not to be plunged into official recession only because of the China-driven mineral commodities boom. Yet China was not even mentioned during the debate. Nor was there any discussion of the sovereign debt crisis now spreading internationally, triggering the coordinated global shift from stimulus to austerity.

On Afghanistan, there was agreement that Australia would remain involved in the US-led war for as long as was deemed necessary. Gillard insisted: "The thing that defines how long we're going to be there is getting the job done, not a deadline in time."

Abbott sought to capitalise on the widespread popular concern and opposition over the political coup against Kevin Rudd, which saw Gillard installed as prime minister. But he was incapable of discussing the powerful big business interests that directed it, because he, too, is beholden to the very same forces.

The sham debate underscores the fact that the election campaign continues the conspiracy against the people that was marked by Gillard's back-door elevation. That is what lends the campaign its artificial character—with one carefully stage managed debate, and no public meetings or other events held for ordinary people to question, let alone challenge, the leader of either of the two major establishment parties.

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