

# Australian Labor Party's campaign “launch”: Gillard pitches her right-wing credentials to corporate elite

Patrick O'Connor  
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The Australian Labor Party formally launched its federal election campaign yesterday, with Prime Minister Julia Gillard using the occasion to pitch her pro-business credentials against those of opposition leader Tony Abbott.

In keeping with the official campaign itself, an air of unreality hung over the event. Labor's “launch”, staged in the final week of a five-week campaign, featured an austere backdrop, with little of the usual hoopla accompanying such affairs. The absence of blaring pop music, balloons, and so on, was intended to signal the government's commitment to “responsible” economic management. The overarching theme of the event was the Gillard government's public spending “restraint” and commitment to eliminate the budget deficit in line with the demands of big business and finance capital.

Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-1991) was given top billing to establish Labor's record. He attacked the Liberals for incompetent economic management, declaring that when he took office in the early 1980s, Singapore's strongman Lee Kuan Yew had declared that Australia was on its way to being the “poor white trash” of Asia. Moreover, Treasury officials had advised him that the national debt was the outcome of the worst post-war economic performance of all OECD countries.

The Labor government, Hawke continued, responded by making a series of “tough decisions” to rescue the Australian economy. The former prime minister did not elaborate on the impact of these decisions on the working class—including the destruction of entire sections of industry, the plunging of tens of thousands of people into permanent unemployment, and an immense transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society that resulted in an unprecedented level of social inequality.

Hawke pointedly acknowledged that the Labor government “could not have done that without the great committed support of the Australian trade union movement”. He explained: “The trade unions then in the

1980s, as we started to get the economy going, they could have pressed for higher wages and they could have got them. But they said no, we're going to act in the national interest. And with their involvement we transformed the Australian economy and made the Australian economy so much more competitive.”

These remarks stand as an indictment of the unions' role in facilitating the destruction of jobs and working conditions and the undermining of wages throughout the period of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. They also point to the role the unions will play if Gillard Labor is re-elected.

When Gillard took to the stage, she thanked Hawke for “proving to us that you can make big change with strong leadership”. Several other former Labor leaders were absent—Paul Keating was reportedly ill, Gough Whitlam resides in a nursing home, while Mark Latham, it seems, failed to receive an invite after he intervened in the campaign as “guest reporter” for a television current affairs program, and publicly advised voters to spoil their ballots on August 21.

Gillard was obligated to acknowledge former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in whose Queensland electorate the party launch was held, describing him as a man of “great achievement” with “great achievements to lie in the future”. The two figures are yet to campaign publicly together, but Labor hopes that Rudd's appearance will blunt opposition allegations of disunity. Since Gillard appealed to Rudd to join the national campaign and promised him a senior cabinet post if Labor were re-elected, the damaging leaks have ceased. But enormous public disquiet and opposition over the June 23-24 coup remains.

Gillard's speech demonstrated, once again, that Rudd's ousting was not merely aimed at installing a “fresh face” to halt sliding opinion polls. On the contrary, the new prime minister was installed to align government policy more closely with big business diktats. While she immediately junked the mining tax, she is now required to carry out the

more complex task of winding up the fiscal stimulus measures introduced after the 2008 financial crash and imposing an austerity agenda.

At the centre of Gillard's speech was her pledge to repay the deficit and government debt. "I definitely want to see this nation repay that debt, and that's why I'll bring the budget to surplus in 2013, and it's why each and every day of this campaign, every time I have announced that we would spend on a new priority, we have also announced we would make the matching savings, because I will not delay bringing the budget to surplus by one hour, by one day," she declared.

Gillard also positioned herself to the right of the opposition Liberal Party on public spending. "It's Mr Abbott who's splashing money around during the election," she said. "On average he's spent a billion dollars a day, each and every day of this election campaign. A billion dollars and he's refused to put those policies and plans in for proper costing... The real risk for debt and deficit, the real risk for debt and deficit in this campaign is Mr Abbott."

Likewise, the prime minister insisted that Labor would deliver lower company tax. "He [Abbott] wants to put company tax up," she declared. "I want to put it down... He stands for more tax in this campaign. I stand for tax cuts, tax benefits, tax relief for every Australian business."

This was the central message—nearly the only message—conveyed by Gillard yesterday. She made no attempt to advance any new policies or spending measures that addressed any aspect of the social crisis confronting broad layers of the population. The only policy announcement of any substance related to Labor's plan to have medical professionals available for consultation over the Internet, and later through the planned national broadband network. The prime minister failed to speak about a whole range of pressing issues, including climate change and the environmental crisis, mounting tensions between the US and China, and the war in Afghanistan. Interestingly, despite the silence of all the major parties on the criminal, US-led occupation, yesterday's *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial described Canberra's failure to take over responsibility from the departing Dutch for Oruzgan province as "the elephant in the room" of the election campaign.

Gillard's pitch to business was combined with an emphasis on her personal "story". Declaring she would "speak from my heart", the prime minister rolled out a series of well-worn right-wing nostrums. She had always believed "in the power of hard work, in the importance of work, in defining a life in the importance of work, in earning your keep"; her immigrant parents "didn't come asking for a free ride, they came seeking a fair go ... they found it and they

worked hard for it".

And so it went on, culminating in Gillard's praise of US President Barack Obama and her attempt to copy him with her stilted declaration, repeated several times, "yes we will".

The personal narrative was intended as a substitute for any reference to the social reformist nostrums of Labor's distant past. Tellingly, the Labor Party logo was nowhere to be seen. While committed, from its foundations in the early 1890s, to a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, Labor once sought to identify itself with a progressive redistribution of wealth, however limited, in the form of additional welfare provisions and new social programs benefiting the poor and vulnerable. Now the opposite is the case. During the past 25 years, beginning with Hawke and Keating, Labor has been dedicated to eliminating previous social reforms, and Gillard Labor is set to vastly accelerate this process.

During the 2007 federal election campaign, Kevin Rudd, as opposition leader, attacked John Howard for his "reckless spending", resulting in a swing by decisive sections of business and the media behind Labor. In the 2010 campaign, the corporate elite appears to have concluded that Abbott and his colleagues are too erratic and untested to warrant support. There remains a definite lack of enthusiasm, however, amid concerns that neither party will prove capable of implementing the kind of austerity measures required to maintain the "international competitiveness" of Australian capitalism.

The *Australian* today declared Gillard's speech "flawless, if uninspiring", while concluding her policies on welfare, unemployment, and broadband "offer just the hint of a party that realises it is running out of time to regenerate itself after the loss of direction so evident in recent years". The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that "Labor's is essentially a conservative program: Australians are urged to study hard to obtain skills and qualifications, work hard to raise a family... With her steady, unexciting argument, the Prime Minister was out to project stability, and contrast herself with what she portrayed as a risky, mercurial opposition leader."

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Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170



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