

Australian Labor Party votes on new leadership election rules

Nick Beams
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Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has billed the adoption of his sweeping proposals to the way the leader of the Labor Party is elected as a “positive day for democracy in Australia.”

But both the form of the Labor Party caucus meeting of the House of Representatives and Senate members of parliament, which adopted the new measures on Monday, and the content of the decision itself, expose that assertion.

Rather than convene within the confines of Parliament House in the national capital Canberra, Rudd and other Labor leaders decided to hold the meeting in the Balmain Town Hall, the former working class suburb credited with being the birthplace of the Labor Party in 1891.

However any attempt to conjure up a “back to the people” image was belied by the event itself. A major security presence had been organised in advance. The venue was cordoned off by police and government security forces, ensuring that the Labor MPs entering the hall did not have to come into contact with local residents.

Riot police were brought in to surround pro-refugee protestors and confine them to the opposite side of the road from the Town Hall. The protests had been called to denounce the announcement last Friday by the Rudd government that henceforth all refugees travelling by boats to Australia would be deported and permanently consigned to the impoverished nation of Papua New Guinea, never to be allowed access to Australia. After the meeting, Rudd was protected by a phalanx of police, who forced demonstrators and curious locals off the footpath as he made his way to a nearby restaurant.

Rudd hailed the decision on the leadership changes as a “great day for Australian Labor Party members across our nation.” But the sentiments of the dwindling numbers of active rank-and-file members of the party who still remain was probably more accurately summed up by a young man who, to loud cheers, burnt his party membership card

in front of the Town Hall in protest against the Labor government’s refugee decision.

Under the new election procedures, the first such change in the party’s 122-year history, the Labor leader will now be selected by a ballot of all sitting MPs (the caucus) combined with a ballot of the party’s members, with each ballot having a 50 percent weighting in determining the final outcome.

The change in procedure was billed as a response to the events that led to the ousting of Rudd as prime minister in the leadership coup organised by factional leaders within the Labor Party caucus on June 23–24, 2010.

Virtually insurmountable barriers now exist to such overnight challenges. Under the new rules, a leadership ballot aimed at removing a Labor prime minister can only take place if 75 percent of caucus members sign a petition—and only on the basis that the leader has “brought the party into disrepute.” If Rudd is returned as prime minister in the coming election, he will be effectively irremovable.

Under the new rules, even when the Labor Party is in opposition, its leader can only be challenged after a petition signed by 60 percent of caucus members. Seeking to appeal to the widespread hostility toward the manner in which he was removed three years ago, Rudd has presented the new rules as ensuring a more “democratic” Labor Party. In fact, the real motivations are elsewhere.

Rudd himself pointed to them in an interview held earlier this month, shortly before an address to the National Press Club in which he declared that the central economic policy challenge was to boost productivity and establish a “national competitiveness agenda.”

In a direct response to demands from business representatives for political leaders who “get things done”, Rudd told a press conference: “Too often political leaders are going to become timid and intimidated by the usual avalanche of opinion polls when difficult decisions

are taken. The whole quality of government and governance starts to decline as political leaders have to look constantly behind, over their shoulders, when hard things are being decided on.”

The significance of the change in the leadership election process, as key sections of the ruling elites demand the imposition of an austerity agenda as soon as the election is out of the way, was underscored in a comment on July 10 by Paul Kelly, the editor-at-large of the Murdoch flagship, the *Australian*.

Kelly wrote: “It protects a PM against opinion-poll panic, neutralises destabilising leadership campaigns and invests the PM with more policy confidence and courage. Rudd’s decision is a transforming event.”

An editorial in the *Australian* on July 20, lauding a speech by Rudd’s treasurer Chris Bowen, outlined the agenda being demanded by the financial and corporate elite amid growing expectations of a sharp slowdown in the Chinese economy which has fuelled the Australian minerals boom.

The *Australian* hailed Bowen’s speech for emphasising that “improving productivity, spreading competition and harnessing market forces will be the keys to sustaining Australia’s prosperity during the inevitable and imminent economic transition as the boom begins to peter out...as Mr Bowen said: whoever wins the forthcoming election will have to lead Australia down the more politically difficult path, kick-starting the reform motor largely left on idle since 2007.”

In order to impose such an agenda, which will involve deepening attacks on the working class, the ruling class is demanding the installation of the kind of anti-democratic “technocratic” regimes introduced in Greece and Italy in order to inflict austerity.

The change in the rules of the election of the Labor Party leadership marks a clear step in that direction.



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