

Australian election “debate”: A stage-managed farce

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12 August 2013

Last night’s televised debate between Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and opposition leader Tony Abbott underscored the hollow and deceitful character of the official campaign for the September 7 election. Throughout the stage-managed proceedings, the two leaders demonstrated a right-wing bipartisan approach on every issue, while concealing the real agenda they will implement after the election.

For the corporate elite and its media outlets, the contest between Rudd and Abbott largely comes down to who can be best relied upon to implement US and European-style austerity measures, eliminating welfare, public healthcare and education. These issues dominated the hour-long debate.

David Speers of Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News chaired the event and put the first question to Rudd: why was government spending now higher than it was under the former Howard government. Questioning Abbott, Speers asked how he would cut spending.

Peter Hartcher from Fairfax Media asked the same question more stridently. He cited recent statements by former Treasury secretary Ken Henry, that any future government, Labor or Liberal, would be compelled to implement “a permanent process of cutting spending.” Hartcher demanded that Rudd and Abbott explain which spending programs they would eliminate.

Neither leader provided a direct answer. Rudd and Abbott are well aware that they will not be elected if they publicly spell out the next round of spending cuts they are preparing to implement on behalf of big business. Both suggested that the problem could be avoided by “growing the economy,” but neither explained how that could be done in conditions of global economic slump. Rudd repeated his vacuous slogan—the need for a “transition” now that the mining boom was over—but when questioned could not explain

what that meant.

Rudd’s strategy has been to make coded promises to big business on the one hand, while on the other accusing Abbott of preparing “slash and burn” spending cuts targeting health and education. In his opening address, the prime minister pointedly referred to the record of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments from 1983–1996 when they made the “transition” from “the old economy”. This was the period of unprecedented pro-market “restructuring”, which led to a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporate elite. Rudd also approvingly cited the spending cuts contained in his government’s recent “mini-budget,” which also contained a pledge to make whatever additional cuts were necessary to eliminate the deficit.

Rudd then turned on Abbott, declaring that it was “important to be transparent about what you’re going to cut and what you’re going to save”, adding that Abbott had “a continued policy of evasion on this.” The panel of corporate journalists chimed in, asking how Abbott would keep his promise to balance the budget while, at the same time, cutting corporate taxes and boosting spending.

Insofar as Abbott has a strategy, it is to lie and rely on the widespread animosity and distrust felt by ordinary workers and young people towards the Labor government. Time and again, he repeated his slogan: “We cannot afford another three years like the last six.” Flatly denying that a Coalition government would increase the regressive goods and services tax (GST), Abbott rejected claims he would need to implement \$70 billion of new cuts to balance the budget.

At one point, the opposition leader declared indignantly: “This idea that the coalition is ready with a great big scalpel to slash health, to slash education, to

slash jobs, is simply wrong,”—yet another blatant lie. Abbott’s shadow treasurer Joe Hockey spelled out the ultimate agenda of both major parties in a major speech last year, when hee called for an end to the “age of entitlement”, meaning that government spending on welfare and social services should simply be eliminated.

But Rudd did not press Abbott on the issue, knowing full well that Labor is also preparing to meet corporate demands for “slash-and-burn” budget cuts. In fact, no one really challenged anyone on any issue of substance—indicating the underlying agreement throughout the political and media establishment about the corporate agenda that will follow the anti-democratic charade of the election campaign, whichever party wins office.

Issues affecting millions of working people—unemployment, low wages, poverty, deteriorating services—were not discussed at all. Unsurprisingly, the reactionary campaign against asylum seekers, however, featured strongly in last night’s debate. Leaders and panel journalists alike agree on scapegoating refugees for the social crisis. Debate host Speers declared that, alongside the economy and spending cuts, the entry of asylum seekers into Australia by sea was “the other big issue in this election campaign.”

Once again, Rudd and Abbott engaged in their obscene bidding war to prove who could be “toughest” on some of the world’s most vulnerable people. Rudd attacked Abbott from the right, boasting about his new policy of permanently barring refugees from ever claiming asylum in Australia by dumping them illegally and permanently in impoverished Papua New Guinea. The problem with the former Howard government’s “Pacific Solution”, the prime minister stated, was that the majority of refugees deported to Nauru “used it as a wait station and within a couple of years were in Australia anyway.”

Only one question on social policy was put to Rudd and Abbott, on their respective aged-care plans. Here, right-wing bipartisanship was again on display. The opposition leader declared “on this issue there isn’t an enormous difference between the coalition and the government,” adding that he agreed with the government’s agenda. Neither leader spelled out the policy, which is to promote more privatised care

services and compel the elderly to pay the full cost.

The debate demonstrated the debased character of official politics in Australia, and the chasm that separates the entire parliamentary setup from the interests and concerns of the working class. The omission of any mention of foreign policy highlighted the fact that its primary purpose was to suppress any knowledge or discussion among ordinary people of the most critical issues they confront.

Since the 2010 election, the Obama administration has advanced its strategic “pivot to Asia” with plans to shift 60 percent of US naval and air forces to the Indo-Pacific in an aggressive attempt to encircle China. The Gillard and Rudd Labor governments have unconditionally lined up behind the “pivot”, placing the Australian population on the front line of US war preparations, with a new American Marine base in Darwin and greater US access to other Australian military bases. Whistler-blower Edward Snowden has revealed that US-controlled spy bases in Australia, including Pine Gap, play a central role in Washington’s vast illegal global surveillance programs.

The absence of any discussion of these issues in last night’s debate is the product of a conscious decision within the highest levels of the state apparatus to maintain an election campaign blackout on the implications of the US “pivot” for millions of ordinary people, in Australia and throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and the growing danger of a US-China war.



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