

Australian party leaders engage in another phony “debate”

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22 August 2013

Last night’s second election debate between Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and opposition leader Tony Abbott, falsely billed as a “people’s forum,” was another stage-managed affair that served to underscore the fact that the campaigns of both parties are based on lies and deceit.

Behind the scenes, the Labor and Liberal parties are each preparing to implement sweeping spending cuts on behalf of big business and the ultra-wealthy, targeting welfare basic services including health and education, and public sector jobs. Publicly, however, Rudd and Abbott disavow this austerity agenda. The prime minister seeks to win support by accusing Abbott of secretly preparing to slash spending, while the opposition leader criticises the Labor government for the regressive cutbacks it has already implemented.

The media promoted this charade as a meaningful contest. An *Australian* headline today declared, “at last a real debate.” In reality, Rudd and Abbott are two representatives of the corporate-financial elite, who are in agreement on every substantial policy matter.

In their opening remarks, both Rudd and Abbott began by acknowledging what the prime minister called their “shared views” on many issues.

They spoke at the Brisbane Broncos rugby league club in Brisbane, with Sky News moderating and broadcasting the event. The venue selection was itself revealing—the Broncos are owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and rake in the highest revenues of any league club in Australia, registering a \$1.9 million profit last financial year. Located in a “marginal” electorate that both the Labor and Liberal parties are desperate to win, Rudd has pledged to provide the club with \$3 million of public subsidies to upgrade its facilities, while on the morning of the election debate, Abbott announced he would hand over \$5 million if elected.

Such pledges characterise the official campaign as a whole, which is dominated by the major parties pledging government handouts for selected business interests and targeted constituencies, to be paid for through further spending cuts affecting working people as a whole.

At the debate, from which representatives of all other

political parties were again excluded, the questions were put by some of the 100 people selected by the Galaxy Research polling company from a pool of “undecided” voters. According to one report, audience members “were under strict instructions by organisers not to make any noise at all.” The moderator immediately cut off anyone who sought to preface their question with any views of their own.

Despite these restrictions, most of the questions concerned social issues, public services, living standards and working conditions. That was a stark contrast to the first debate, where the questions, put by Canberra press gallery journalists, were dominated by demands that Rudd and Abbott commit publicly to the spending cuts they will implement after the election.

The first question, raised by a human services university student, asked Abbott to respond to “allegations” that he would cut “public services and jobs,” when these services, including housing and homelessness services, are already overstretched.

The opposition leader declared that, while “we do have to find some savings,” it was wrong to say that he would be “Mr. Cut, Cut, Cut.” Abbott declared that the Rudd government “cut \$1.5 billion from public hospitals, including a retrospective cut, including here in Queensland, it’s cut \$3.8 billion from universities.” Rudd responded by accusing Abbott of reducing public hospital funding by \$1 billion when he served as health minister in the former Howard government.

In fact, successive Labor and Coalition governments over the past three decades implemented policies that have resulted in a massive redistribution of wealth from the working class to the richest layers of society. Essential social services, such as public education and health care, have already been starved of funds or privatised. Neither Rudd nor Abbott addressed the part of the question dealing referring to homelessness, which has increased under each government, despite empty pledges of action from both parties.

The cynical posturing by the prime minister and opposition

leader continued throughout the debate. The Labor government has entrenched a budget framework of permanent austerity. It has already plunged tens of thousands of single parents into poverty by placing them on unemployment benefits, blocked many disabled people from accessing the disability pension, slashed university funding, while accelerating the privatisation of the country's school system, and destroyed thousands of public service jobs.

Rudd's economic statement, or mini-budget, released two days before he announced the election date, forecast a surplus by 2016–17, based on absurdly optimistic economic forecasts. The government has promised the financial elite it will impose whatever additional spending cuts prove necessary, likely totalling tens of billions of dollars, to deliver the scheduled elimination of the deficit.

None of these issues were raised in the course of the "people's forum." Nor was there any discussion of the accelerating global economic crisis and the slowdown in China and its impact on the Australian economy.

Instead there was a litany of lies and evasions. Asked about his industrial relations agenda, aimed at boosting corporate profits by further undermining workplace protections, Abbott denied that the Liberal Party would ever revive the former Howard government's WorkChoices legislation. Asked about the environment, Rudd promoted his emissions trading scheme—a "free market" policy that is primarily aimed at delivering the financial sector lucrative new openings into the world trade in carbon credits—as an important measure to tackle climate change, when in fact Australian greenhouse gas emissions will be allowed to increase further.

Both Rudd and Abbott denied planning to withdraw from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, though their shared agenda of brutally deporting and permanently barring all refugees who arrive by sea is in blatant violation of the Convention, as well as other basic tenets of international law.

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The two candidates effectively dismissed a question challenging the "immoral" provision of public money to large corporations. Rudd boasted of his concern to subsidise "strategic industries" for the country, including the military production sector and the car industry.

Another question concerned the opposition's parental leave proposal, which involves providing women with the equivalent of their full salary for six months, capped at annual salaries of \$150,000. This would result in the highest income earners receiving \$75,000 in public funds, while low-income earners would receive far less. The unemployed and those women unable to work would get nothing. While Rudd

sought to label the policy "unfair," he focussed on its alleged unaffordability. This was the prime minister's pitch to the corporate elite. Costing more than \$22 billion over four years, Abbott's parental leave scheme is to be partially funded by a 1.5 percent corporate tax levy on the largest companies, and has been roundly denounced in business and media circles.

Under the Rudd government's present scheme, women who have given birth are provided with the minimum wage for just 18 weeks. This is designed to increase women's workforce participation for the lowest possible amount of government spending, boosting the pool of exploitable labour for business and lowering women's average wages by 2 percent. It is "equitable" only in the sense that all women are condemned to the same low pay.

Among the many important issues not raised in the "people's forum," as with the first debate, was the US-led encirclement of China, Washington's stepped-up military presence in Australia, and the active preparations being made for war in East Asia. A virtual "D-notice" is being maintained on these issues throughout the election campaign.

The media responded to the second Rudd-Abbott debate with more vapid commentary about who had "won," and whether the opposition leader's outburst at one point in the event, saying the prime minister should "shut up," would damage his campaign.

The only genuine forums permitting an open and democratic political discussion on the critical issues confronting the working class and young people have been those organised by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers and youth to support the SEP's election campaign and make plans to attend our final election meetings.

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