

# Australia: Phony “leaders’ debate” for NSW state election

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The final leaders’ debate was a perfunctory half-hour affair last Friday night hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation inside the New South Wales (NSW) parliament building, with no live audience.

Both in its secluded surroundings and its deceitful content, the phony “debate” for the March 28 election in Australia’s most populous state underscored the disconnect between the political establishment and ordinary working people, and the crisis of Australia’s parliamentary system.

Like the first two set-piece “debates” between Liberal-National Party Premier Mike Baird and Labor Party leader Luke Foley, none of the burning issues facing the working class was mentioned—the danger of war, the deepening world slump, the ongoing assault on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions, and attacks on democratic rights. All other parties, including the Socialist Equality Party, were anti-democratically excluded in order to present the two major parties of the corporate elite as the only choices available to voters.

From his opening comments, Foley revealed how much Labor is cynically hoping to claw its way back into office—just four years after receiving its lowest vote (25.5 percent) for more than a century—by exploiting the popular hostility to the sell-off of state assets and the austerity offensive of the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Foley’s pitch was closely in line with that just employed by Labor to oust a first-term Liberal-National government in the neighbouring state of Queensland’s January 31 election. Like Queensland Labor leader Annastacia Palaszczuk, Foley feigned opposition to privatisation and the federal budget cuts.

“We will keep the electricity network in public hands,” Foley claimed, vowing to ditch the Baird government’s plan to try to raise \$20 billion by leasing

49 percent of the power grid—the “poles and wires”—for 99 years. This is a sham on multiple levels.

In the first place, Labor itself made repeated efforts, in 1997 under Premier Bob Carr and 2007 under Premier Morris Iemma, to sell off all the electricity infrastructure. With the help of the trade unions, who stifled the opposition of their members, Labor finally privatised everything but the “poles and wires” before its landslide defeat in 2011. On this issue, as on every other, Labor has a long track record of seeking to impose every demand of the financial markets.

Second, Foley committed himself to implement a federal regulator’s restructuring scheme for the electricity network to make it “run efficiently”—a plan that would require the axing of 4,600 jobs, on top of the thousands already eliminated by previous Labor governments.

Third, Foley has made it clear in several media interviews since he was installed as Labor leader late last year that he fully favours the privatisation of state assets. In an interview published by the *Australian* the morning after the “debate,” Foley complained that he was wrongly depicted in the *Australian Financial Review* as anti-privatisation. He reiterated that he had no “ideological” opposition to asset sales, giving as an example: “I don’t see a need for the state to own ports.”

Equally aware of the public opposition to privatisation, Baird sought to downplay the electricity sell-off, insisting that leasing for 99 years was different and that his government had no intention of going beyond relinquishing 49 percent ownership. It was a far cry from Baird’s public pledges, directed to the corporate elite after he was selected last year as Liberal leader, to make an aggressive bid to impose privatisations.

Like the recently defeated Queensland premier Campbell Newman, Baird has been heavily promoted by the corporate media, and backed by the Abbott government, as a figure who could lead the way nationally in launching the wholesale economic restructuring being demanded by the financial elite amid the worsening impact of the post-2008 global economic breakdown.

There is, however, widespread public antagonism toward the Abbott government's attempts to impose the dictates of big business. Both Baird and Foley spent much of their time during Friday's debate posturing as opponents of Abbott and condemning the multi-billion dollar cuts to state health and education spending in last year's federal budget.

Baird even declared that if he were reelected, he would make reversing the cuts "agenda item number one" for the state and territory leaders. Foley's final line for the night was equally fanciful: "We need a premier who is not a rubberstamp for a federal prime minister."

Labor's claims to oppose the federal budget cuts are no less a fraud than its anti-privatisation pretences. Foley's federal counterparts voted, along with the Greens, for the budget appropriation bills last June that began to slash \$80 billion from education and health funding over the next decade. During 2012-13, the previous federal Labor governments of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd carried out the deepest cuts to social spending since World War II.

Regardless of whether Labor or Liberal wins the NSW election, or the next federal election, this social assault will intensify as the "mining boom" that has underpinned Australian capitalism for nearly 25 years continues to implode.

Foley's interview in Saturday's *Australian* laid bare the deceit of his "debate" posturing. Foley insisted that he is a Labor "moderniser." He named former premier Neville Wran, along with ex-prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, and former British prime minister Tony Blair, as his heroes.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Hawke and Keating, together with Wran, personified the transformation of the Labor Party into the spearhead of pro-market restructuring. Under the impact of globalised production, they ditched Labor's previous claims that it could reform capitalism in the interests of the working

class. As for Blair, under the banner of New Labour, he continued and extended the pro-market onslaught on workers begun under the Tory government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

By nominating these figures as his idols, Foley's intent is clear. It is to assure the ruling elites that a state Labor government will be no less committed to meeting the requirements of the transnational corporations, banks and money markets.

The only way to end the onslaught on living standards and the threat of war is to end the source of the global crisis—the capitalist profit system and its nation-state divisions. That is why the Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the NSW election is aimed at building a new revolutionary leadership based on a socialist perspective. We urge our readers to study our election statement and contact the SEP about how to join our party.

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