

# Banality and lies mark Australian election “debate”

James Cogan—SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW  
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The second official televised debate for the July 2 election took place last night between Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, representing the governing Liberal-National Party Coalition, and Bill Shorten, representing the opposition Labor Party. For one hour, the two leaders subjected anyone who endured the event to demagoguery, obfuscations and lies.

Reflecting the broad reaction, Fairfax Media’s chief political correspondent Mark Kenny commented today: “From an entertainment standpoint in Sunday night prime time, the leaders’ debate was nigh-on diabolical. From an information stand point, even worse.”

Turnbull is seeking to avoid going down in history as the first leader of a defeated one-term government since 1931. His speech last night was replete with rhetoric about “times of enormous opportunity” and a “national economic plan that will create stronger economic growth.” The reality of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s Depression, deepening slump in Australia and ever-worsening conditions for millions of working-class people, was blatantly covered over.

Far from challenging Turnbull’s fraud, Shorten shared it. He responded with populist assertions about “Labor’s positive plans for a strong economy and a fair society.” He called for people to “trust Labor” to protect health services and improve education. Just days before, his treasury spokesperson Chris Bowen had vowed Labor would meet the demands of the financial markets for a massive reduction in the budget deficit, in order to protect Australia’s “triple-A” credit rating.

In a rare moment of honesty, Shorten admitted in response to a question that Labor “will have more repairs to the budget bottom line than spends.” In fact, Labor already ditched three key promises last

Thursday, namely to reverse the government’s abolition of family payments for school children, harsh assets tests for the aged pension and cuts to aged care services.

With the annual federal budget deficit blowing out toward \$40 billion, Turnbull and Shorten stood before the television cameras with the full knowledge that they will toss aside any other pledges they make in the campaign and move to impose drastic cutbacks to government spending as soon as the election is out of the way. They represent political parties that have long been committed to the interests of the financial and corporate elite.

Incapable of telling the truth about their agenda, Turnbull and Shorten instead sought to appeal to voters with anecdotes about how they had “struggled” as the children of single parents and therefore understood the concerns of ordinary people. The fact is that Turnbull, a multi-millionaire and former investment banker, belongs to the top 0.1 percent in terms of income and wealth, while Shorten, a life-long trade union bureaucrat before entering parliament in 2007, is easily among the top 1 percent.

The only seeming passion during the debate emerged on the issue on refugees. Shorten adamantly insisted that the Labor Party would persecute them no less ruthlessly than the Coalition. He vowed that Labor would continue the Coalition’s policy of turning back boats seeking to reach Australia, imprisoning refugees on remote Pacific Islands and denying them their right to claim asylum.

Polling indicates that the Turnbull government’s campaign, which is largely based on claims that corporate tax cuts will drive economic activity, is viewed with widespread hostility. The Coalition parties are losing support in every part of the country. Labor,

however, is only making minor improvements in its standing. What is emerging in the course of the election is the profound crisis and break-up of the traditional two-party parliamentary system, as a result of the mass opposition among ordinary people to the policies of both the Coalition and Labor.

The most striking aspect of the debate was that the three political journalists selected to politely question Turnbull and Shorten avoided any reference to foreign or defence policy. Not one question was asked about why Australian capitalism is spending at least \$194 billion over the next 10 years on new submarines, warships, jet fighters and other military hardware.

The leaders of the major capitalist parties were not asked to state their position on the rising tensions between the United States and China, or between the US and its allies and Russia—tensions that could lead to an open clash between nuclear-armed states. Shorten was not asked to restate the call made by Labor's defence spokesperson, Stephen Conroy, for Australia to send warships into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea, and risk a military confrontation. There were no questions about the expanding number of visits to Australian airfields and ports by nuclear-capable American aircraft and warships or the role of the US communications base at Pine Gap in central Australia in organising, across the Middle East, drone assassinations that are illegal under international law.

Not even the ongoing Australian military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were the subject of a question, just days after it was revealed Australian troops are on the frontline of the assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah.

Overall, the debate underscored a central feature of Australian political life. It confirmed just how consciously the mass media collaborates with the political establishment to conceal the extent of Australia's integration into US war preparations against China in Asia, and its role in US-led intrigues and interventions around the globe. Aware that a genuine discussion on the danger of war would galvanise anti-war sentiment, everything is done to suppress it.

The candidates of the Socialist Equality Party are the only ones seeking to break the conspiracy of silence and raise before the working class and youth the real issues they confront: above all the need for a struggle

against militarism and austerity on the basis of socialist and internationalist policies.

*To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.*

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