

Australian Labor Party leader: We will keep voting for government's legislation

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Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese this week told his members of parliament to get used to voting for the Liberal-National Coalition government's bills, even if they claimed to disagree with them.

It was another blunt signal of Labor's further sharp shift to the right in the wake of its historic debacle at the May 18 federal election, where its vote plunged to its lowest level in a century despite widespread hostility to the right-wing government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Addressing Labor's parliamentary caucus, Albanese declared: "We will often be confronted with circumstances where we will vote on an issue which includes measures we agree with and measures we disagree with. That is exactly what happened with tax and it will keep on happening."

Albanese made it clear that Labor's vote last month for the government's massive income tax handouts to the rich was no aberration. As a result of that vote, billions of dollars will be handed to the top 5 percent of the population—those taxpayers receiving more than \$200,000 a year—while the millions of low-paid workers, students and welfare recipients trying to live on less than \$41,000 a year will get nothing.

Clearly aware of popular outrage at Labor's open embrace of the Coalition's agenda, Albanese told the *Guardian* that Labor MPs had to hold the line despite "the disappointment that is out there." He accused anyone who objected to this of "looking for easy answers."

Contemptuously, Albanese dismissed any suggestion of retaining the policies that Labor took to the election, pretending to crack down on huge tax concessions for wealthy investors and property owners. "We've seen the movie, it just played out, and we've seen the conclusion," he said.

Albanese pronounced that Labor MPs had to vote for the government's latest bill, imposing mandatory prison sentences for "possessing child abuse material," even though that meant overturning Labor Party policy against such compulsory jail terms.

This will be the third such vote within weeks. As well as supporting the government's income tax bonanza for the wealthy, Labor MPs backed unprecedented legislation to allow the home affairs minister to exclude Australian citizens from re-entering the country for at least two years if the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) deems them likely to participate in "politically motivated violence."

As soon as he was elected party leader unopposed in May, Albanese vowed to pursue bipartisanship with Morrison's government. This is not a tactical ploy. It is part of Labor's commitment, also spelt out by Albanese, to forge closer ties to business, boost "wealth creation" and appeal to "successful people."

By his latest move, Albanese has underscored the ditching of the phony populism of Labor's election campaign, during which it claimed to oppose "the big end of town" and champion a "fair go" for workers. This stance was a failed attempt to divert the mounting anger over soaring social inequality and declining working class conditions behind the election of another big business Labor government.

While the corporate media welcomed Albanese's stand, there was nervousness that it could fuel social and political unrest. Political columnist for the *Australian* Simon Benson warned: "The Labor leader's admission of political impotency ... risks reinforcing a perception of a feeble opposition."

In a bid to justify his position, Albanese compared Labor's position in parliament to that following the 2004 election, when the Howard Coalition government

held a majority in both houses of parliament. “Even though it’s only dawning on people slowly, effectively the government is in a similar position in the Senate now as 2004,” he told Labor’s caucus. “And they will get most of their agenda through parliament.”

This is a total fraud. First of all, the unpopular Howard government was able to gain control of parliament only because of the ongoing antipathy toward Labor, whose then leader, Mark Latham, pledged a renewal of the offensive launched against working class jobs, conditions and basic rights by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

Second, the Morrison government barely scraped back into office. Its vote actually fell, by nearly 1 percentage point, down to 41.5 percent, and even lower in the Senate, where its vote was 37.99 percent. In fact, because 15 percent of voters abstained or cast an informal ballot, the Coalition’s vote was less than 36 percent of the electorate.

Widely detested, the government won a majority of seats on the back of preference votes from various far-right parties, which exploited deep discontent through fake “anti-elite” demagoguery.

Labor’s vote plunged to a century low of 33.1 percent in the lower house and 28.79 percent in the Senate. Its support dropped most sharply in working class areas across the country that were once regarded as Labor heartlands, leaving it with virtually no “safe” seats. By contrast, Labor’s vote rose substantially in affluent electorates, reflecting its true social base.

For good reason, many workers, based on decades of bitter experiences, did not believe Labor’s “fair go” rhetoric. After years of successive Labor governments imposing the dictates of the financial elite, Labor could make no credible appeal to workers and young people.

Rather than a swing to the right, as claimed by the corporate media, the working class votes for One Nation and other far-right formations primarily represented a misguided protest. It was a supposed anti-establishment vote, directed against the entire two-party system that has dominated the political order since World War II.

Support is collapsing for the Labor Party and its associated trade unions, which have suppressed the working class and imposed austerity measures for years. For now, this has opened the door for right-wing

populists, seeking to divert the disaffection in reactionary nationalist and anti-immigrant directions.

Albanese and other Labor leaders have effectively banned the language of “fairness,” even as reports since the election have demonstrated that living standards are plummeting and the gulf between the super-rich and the vast majority of the population is accelerating.

Released this week, the latest Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey shows that median household income has fallen since the 2008-09 global financial crisis by \$542 a year to \$80,595. This was accompanied by rising inequality, greater and more entrenched poverty, falling levels of welfare support and increasing casualisation of jobs, especially for young people, 76 percent of whom are now in “non-standard” employment.

Even this is a vast underestimate of the social divide, because the HILDA study is based on an ongoing sample of often multiple-income households, and excludes impoverished new immigrants, refugees, temporary visa holders and international students, most of whom are exploited as cheap labour.

Albanese’s blatant re-positioning is not simply a reaction to Labor’s devastating election defeat. As the Socialist Equality Party warned throughout the election campaign, regardless of the outcome, the feigned concern for social inequality would be junked quickly in the face of a property market crash, a global economic slump, and intensifying trade war and military tensions.

Moreover, Albanese is displaying Labor’s true colours. Far from a party of “social justice,” Labor always has been totally committed to enforcing the profit and political requirements of the capitalist class. Its initial program of seeking concessions within a nationally-regulated framework has long ago given way to reversing all the past gains of the working class in order to make Australian capitalism “globally competitive.”



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