

Australian election survey refutes myths surrounding Labor Party debacle

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Political shockwaves are continuing to reverberate throughout the Australian Labor Party and its trade union partners following Labor's loss to the Liberal-National Coalition government at the May 18 federal election.

Not only did Labor lose what political and media pundits had depicted as an “unlosable” election, its vote dropped to just over 30 percent. Even though the Coalition's vote also fell, the government managed to scrape across the line.

Labor and the unions have been thrown into disarray, wracked by factional warfare, often involving sordid scandals, whether it be over bags of cash received from developers, lucrative house purchases near transport projects or the expulsion of construction union official John Setka. These conflicts began in various states and produced rumblings inside Labor's federal parliamentary caucus meeting on Tuesday. Not an ounce of political principle is involved. Rival blocs are fighting to preserve parliamentary and other privileges, while attempting to stem the collapse of their support.

Amid this turmoil, shadow climate change minister and former party national president Mark Butler declared: “We got our lowest primary vote in a century, against a government the prime minister himself described as the Muppet Show.” Butler insisted that the party's current campaign review “must be ruthless and unsparing” and include all policies.

Butler and others associated with Anthony Albanese, who was installed as party leader after the election debacle, are leading Labor's further lurch to the right. They claim it lost the election because it was too aggressive toward big business and the wealthy.

As soon as he was elected, unopposed, as Labor leader, Albanese pronounced the need for Labor to forge closer ties to business, boost “wealth creation” and appeal to “successful people.” On that basis, Labor voted for the government's substantial income tax cuts for the rich.

Whatever their tactical differences, no one opposed that line in Tuesday's caucus, despite some anxieties being expressed about the nakedness of Albanese's support for one government measure after another.

However, the myth of Labor's defeat being due to its supposed “class warfare” promises to deliver a “fair go” for workers has been exposed by an Australian National University election survey. It pointed to extraordinary political volatility that the media polls failed to register. More than one quarter of people switched their vote during the final weeks of the election campaign.

Labor lost more votes than the Coalition during these weeks, and that was much to do with antipathy toward then Labor leader Bill Shorten, a longtime union-based powerbroker. Labor lost votes on that basis most heavily in poorer areas, while more affluent voters swung to Labor, saying they were attracted by its policies.

By comparing how a sample of 1,844 voters said they planned to vote in April with how they reported they had voted, the survey revealed that 28.7 percent changed their mind. Votes went in all directions. Overall, the Coalition grew its vote by 7.2 percent, while Labor's fell flat. The Greens went backward by 2.6 percent and other parties fared worse.

For former Labor voters, the most common reason for abandoning the party was that their view of Shorten had changed, cited by 27.7 percent. Labor won back some votes on policy, with 20.7 percent of former Coalition voters giving this as one of their reasons for change.

Summarising the results, ANU Associate Professor Nicholas Biddle commented: “Those who swung to Labor did so because of their policies; those who left Labor did so because of Bill Shorten.”

Working-class voters increasingly did not believe the populist “fairness” pitch of Shorten, who epitomised the decades-long record of the unions in enforcing the corporate-government offensive on workers' jobs,

conditions and social services. More affluent voters, however, were attracted by Labor's policies, for all Labor's pretence of cracking down on tax concessions related to property and shareholdings.

These voting switches corresponded to the pattern of the election results. Labor's vote plunged, often to all-time lows, in former "Labor heartland" working-class electorates, while it rose in wealthier ex-"Liberal blue ribbon" electorates. As a result, Labor now holds virtually no working-class seats by a "safe" majority, yet it came closer than ever to winning seats with the highest income levels.

The late swings also reflected the shift that occurred during Labor's campaign, away from its fake "fair go" promises, to reassuring big business that a Labor government would serve its needs, just like all the previous Labor governments.

Shorten began the campaign by demagogically claiming it would be a "referendum on wages." That was an attempt to exploit the brewing discontent over the protracted stagnation of wage levels, while social inequality had visibly widened, with the wealth of the country's billionaires growing dramatically.

But Shorten soon buried that line. Labor's wages policy turned out to be mainly a promise to make a late submission to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the national industrial tribunal, for a slightly higher minimum wage increase to "get wages moving in a modest and meaningful way." Business was reassured.

Likewise, Labor's pledge to restore weekend and overtime penalty rates to some low-paid workers, after the same FWC cut them in 2017, was limited and cynical. The 2007–2013 Labor government, in which Shorten was a key minister, created the pro-business FWC and gave it the power to "review" penalty rates. Moreover, as a longtime leader of the Australian Workers Union, Shorten imposed enterprise agreements that stripped cleaners and other low-paid workers of penalty rates.

For similar reasons, many workers gave no credence to Labor's promises to increase spending on public health, education and essential social programs. By the time of Labor's formal campaign launch on May 5, Shorten was making blatant pitches for the support of the corporate elite. He declared Labor's policies would be "a win for business, a win for the workers and a win for the economy as a whole."

Shorten invoked the legacy of the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, in office from 1983-1996. Through corporatist Accords with big business and the

unions, the Hawke and Keating governments deregulated the economy to satisfy the dictates of the financial markets. They lowered real wages, smashed up shop stewards committees and destroyed hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs.

The past three Labor prime ministers, Keating, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, were in the front row of the audience at the May 5 launch. Rudd sat next to Gillard, who ousted him as prime minister in a backroom coup in June 2010. Shorten hailed the "unity" of the Labor Party that was on display. He offered the ruling class a stable and reliable government, compared to the internal warfare that had wracked the Coalition, during which Prime Minister Scott Morrison last year engineered the removal of his predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull.

Albanese's unadorned shift to meeting the demands of the financial elite is not a sharp turn since the election debacle. It is a continuation of the trajectory that was already on display during the election campaign.

The disintegration of Labor's support in the working class, which has now reached a new turning point, is not accidental.

Over the past four decades, the basis for Labor's previous reformist program of extracting limited concessions from the capitalist class has been shattered by globalisation, which has undercut all forms of national economic regulation. Labor, like social democratic parties and trade unions internationally, turned to dismantling the past gains of workers in order to make its "own" capitalist economy "globally competitive."

Albanese, like his predecessors, from Hawke to Shorten, is totally committed to continuing this path, which means policing even greater attacks on working-class conditions as global capitalism plunges into recession, trade war and military confrontations.



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