

# Australian Labor Party review covers up causes of federal election debacle

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) published an official review into its defeat in the 2019 federal election last Thursday. Even before it was released, the document—prepared by a panel headed by former parliamentarians Jay Weatherill and Craig Emerson—was the subject of bitter wrangling and backroom manoeuvres. It was substantially redrafted at least once to avoid the eruption of a full-scale civil war between rival factions within the party.

The review was commissioned in the wake of Labor's debacle in the May 18 election, in which its primary vote fell to just 33.3 percent, the lowest in 85 years. The result confounded innumerable pundits. They had predicted a landslide Labor victory, amid widespread hostility to the Coalition government and the factional conflict within the Liberal and National parties that had led to the ouster of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his replacement by Scott Morrison in August 2018.

The document, which has been billed as a “warts and all” examination of Labor's defeat, is hardly an impartial review of the election result.

Rather it serves two main political purposes. Firstly, it covers up the real reason for Labor's loss: the party's inability to make any credible appeal to workers and youth after having imposed the dictates of big business for the past four decades. Secondly, it legitimises a shift even further to the right in the wake of the election, based on assurances that Labor is a party of “aspiration” and “wealth creation,” rather than “envy” or “class war.”

To further these aims, the 90-page document ascribes Labor's loss to a host of factors, including “a weak strategy,” a “cluttered policy agenda” and an “unpopular leader.” The review also claims that Labor had “no formal campaign committee” during the election, that it “lacked a culture and structure that encouraged dialogue and challenge” and that it “targeted too many seats.” It provides no explanation, however, as to why Labor's campaign was apparently so shambolic.

The repeated references to the unpopularity of Bill Shorten, who led Labor in the election defeat, are similarly superficial. Shorten has been an unpopular political figure for many years. The fact that he was party leader, however, was hardly accidental.

Shorten played a pivotal role in the party-room coup that ousted former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in June 2010 and installed Julia Gillard, which was aimed at more closely aligning Australia with the US confrontation against China. He was similarly involved in the 2013 removal of Gillard and the reinstatement of Rudd as leader, in a desperate bid to stave off defeat in that year's federal election. Shorten was appointed party leader by his parliamentary colleagues following Labor's 2013 election defeat, despite having lost the popular vote among rank-and-file members of the party.

Shorten embodies the character of the modern Labor Party. He is a longstanding factional powerbroker, who wields influence based upon his support base within the corporatised union bureaucracy and his close ties to Washington. Previous Labor figures with similar connections, such as Gillard, have also been widely unpopular but have been selected to lead the party.

On the policy front, the review asserts that the “sheer size, complexity and frequency” of announcements during the campaign, “made it difficult for local campaigns to communicate them to their voters.”

Throughout the campaign, Shorten made a series of spending promises, including that Labor would make limited increases to health spending and minor hikes in taxes upon the wealthy. This was combined with tepid populist posturing about the “big end of town” being compelled to “pay its fair share.”

The truth is not, as the review suggests, that voters did not understand Labor's various policies. Rather, after decades of Labor and Coalition governments slashing funding for public services, presiding over growing social inequality and championing the interests of the corporate elite, workers did not believe that a Labor government would do anything to reverse the gutting of health, education and social services, or take any other measures that would improve their lives.

Despite covering this up, the review is compelled to note the class dynamics of Labor's vote. It states that “economically insecure, low-income voters in outer-urban and regional Australia swung against Labor” while “tertiary-educated, higher-income Australians swung strongly to Labor.”

The swings against Labor were sharpest in working-class areas of Queensland. Labor's primary vote in the state fell by

over 4.3 percent across the state, with swings of over 15 percent in a number of working class and regional electorates.

The review states that in addition to the “complexity” of policy announcements, the Queensland result stemmed from fears that coal mines would close under a Labor government. While this may have been a factor, it was only one component of broader anger over the destruction of jobs, wages, conditions and services in working-class communities across the country, presided over by Labor and Coalition governments alike.

This is demonstrated by the significant swings against Labor in working-class electorates in Sydney and Melbourne, where there is no coal industry, and in regional and working-class centres across the country. The decline in Labor’s primary vote, moreover, was a continuation of a long-term trend, with the number of ballots cast for the party declining by an average of around three percent at every federal election since 2007.

That the fall in Labor’s vote was part of a broader rejection of the official parliamentary parties is revealed by the fact that the Coalition’s primary vote also fell by over half-a-percent across the country. Many voters sought to register their anger by casting ballots for various right-wing populist parties, other minor parties and independents. The “third party” share of the primary vote, including the Greens, increased to almost 25 percent.

The review points to growing political disaffection. It cites the “Trust in Democracy in Australia” survey, which found that “satisfaction” with “the way democracy works in Australia” plummeted from almost 72 percent in 2013 to around 40 percent in 2018.

The review notes: “Voter trust in politics globally and in Australia has collapsed, resulting in economically insecure, low-income voters treating all political promises with extreme scepticism.”

It points to a crisis of social-democratic parties internationally, including in France and Germany. It warns: “Working people experiencing the dislocation caused by new technologies and globalisation could lose faith in Labor if they do not believe Labor is responding to their issues but is focusing on issues not of concern to them, or in some cases, are actively against their interests.”

In other words, the review hints at the fact that amid the globalisation of the economy and a massive growth of social inequality, Labor has been transformed into an openly pro-business party, whose constituency is among the most privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

With the development of globally-integrated production, Labor took its nationalist and pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion. It became the most ruthless enforcer of the dictates of the corporate elite, to ensure that Australian capitalism remained globally-competitive.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments imposed the agenda of international finance in Australia, deregulating the economy, and together with the

unions, presiding over the destruction of swathes of manufacturing and industry. This agenda was continued by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, which, from 2007 to 2013, intensified a protracted onslaught on public education, healthcare and welfare.

This record, which accounts for the collapse in Labor’s support noted in the review, is hailed by the document as the “reforms” to which the party must return. This is in keeping with current Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s repeated assurances a Labor government would best serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

While promoting this agenda, by calling for Labor to “adopt the language of inclusion and abandon divisive rhetoric, including references to ‘the big end of town,’” the review is also a desperate attempt to suppress factional conflicts inside the party. This is indicated by the fact that the document does not mention the multi-million dollar campaign for a Labor government waged by the trade unions, which failed to increase the party’s votes, or make any mention of foreign policy.

The same day the review was released, Labor parliamentarian Chris Bowen warned that the party needed “to be angry on behalf of the people we represent” and to champion the interests of ordinary people. The comments were a clear rebuke to Albanese and expressed his fear that Labor’s further shift to the right will result in an even greater fall in support.

Bowen, however, offered no concrete policies, and delivered his remarks standing alongside Paul Keating, who is identified, more than any other Labor figure, with an assault on jobs and working conditions.

The review and its recommendations will do nothing to reverse the historic crisis of the Labor Party, which historically has functioned as the chief prop of Australian capitalism. It serves to underscore that the global processes associated with the world economic breakdown and the upsurge of class struggle—including a collapse in support for the official parties and unprecedented discontent—are as present in Australia as they are in every other country.



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