

# Australian Labor parliamentarian demands nationalist “pledge of allegiance” for school children

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Australian Labor Party (ALP) education spokesperson and aspiring party leader Tanya Plibersek delivered a jingoistic speech on Saturday demanding that children in schools recite a pledge of allegiance to the country.

Plibersek issued the proposal on the Australia Day national holiday, held annually on January 26 to mark the beginning of British colonial rule in 1788. Every year the political and media establishment devotes considerable resources towards whipping up “Aussie” nationalism, featuring ludicrous paeans to the supposedly unique Australian qualities of “mateship” and the “fair go,” while the reality of a country riven by enormous class divisions is suppressed.

Plibersek’s speech, delivered at a Sydney Opera House ceremony for new citizens, aimed to position the Labor Party at the forefront of promoting Australian nationalism.

After describing the response of volunteer firefighters and other working people to the bushfire crisis, the Labor politician declared: “Moments like this make me reflect on the nature of patriotism and citizenship. On what it means to truly love your country.”

She continued that “every Australian school student should learn” the citizenship pledge, which reads: “From this time forward, I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.”

Plibersek added: “Patriotism, like mateship, is about solidarity. It’s about what we owe each other as citizens. Patriotism is the knowledge that we’re not alone in this life; that our neighbours are there to share our struggles; that we have 25 million people in our

corner when we need it.”

Who does Plibersek think she’s kidding? Australia’s wealthiest 200 individuals (0.0008 per cent of the population) have a combined fortune of \$350 billion, accumulated, for the most part, through parasitic activities including property speculation, financial wheeling and dealing, and mining exploitation. At the same time the poorest 40 percent of the population own less than 3 percent of total household wealth, while more than 3 million people live in poverty. The ultra-wealthy oligarchy in no way “share the struggles” of the working class, and ordinary people have no experience of such layers being “in our corner when we need it.”

Plibersek’s appeal was warmly welcomed by the Murdoch press and right-wing radio broadcasts. Many working people, in contrast, derided and denounced the proposed pledge of allegiance.

On social media, thousands of comments challenged Plibersek’s speech. Many older people recalled the previous oaths sworn to the Queen of Great Britain. One Twitter comment read: “I attended primary school in the 1950s. Every assembly we recited some meaningless allegiance to the Queen & country etc. What a load of crap it was then & is now. Nationalistic crap-a-do.”

Some commenters raised the worsening social crisis in Australia such as “Meanwhile 17.3% of Australian children live in poverty”: Others expressed anti-nationalist and internationalist sentiments. One wrote: “What the heck is meant by ‘patriotism’? Surely it has become a destructive concept to artificially reduce the diverse life that is still evolving within this planet’s thin crust and air into separate political tribes of

humans? Those ‘countries’ are run like amoral businesses.”

Plibersek, a member of the so-called “left” faction of the Labor Party, delivered her Australia Day speech in the context of the opposition’s determined lurch to the right since its federal election defeat in May last year.

Labor’s promotion of Australian nationalism, however, is tied to far reaching political calculations, beyond the electoral cycle. The Australian Labor Party is the country’s oldest bourgeois party. Its racist and divisive founding ideology of “White Australia” nationalism formed the political basis of the federated Australian state that was formed in 1901. In every period of economic, social, and geopolitical crisis since, the ruling class has relied upon the ALP to utilise nationalism as a means of subordinating the working class to the capitalist state. From the 1970s, the explicitly racist elements of this agenda were jettisoned in favour of a new “multicultural” nationalism (hence Plibersek’s references to “diversity” and “solidarity”), but the political class logic remains the same.

An unprecedented world crisis of the capitalist system now exists. In Australia, as in every advanced capitalist country, there is enormous social inequality. The parliamentary apparatus is widely discredited, as the mass hostility towards the government over its inaction on the bushfire and climate crisis again demonstrated.

Labor’s renewed promotion of Australian nationalism is a conscious appeal to finance capital and big business. Plibersek has raised the pledge of allegiance idea several times over the last decade, and while her earlier calls did not attract as much public attention as her Australia Day speech, reviewing her comments makes clear the connection between Labor’s promotion of nationalism and its commitment to anti-working class austerity programs at home and militarism abroad.

In 2011, when Labor was in office and Plibersek was the minister for Human Services and Social Inclusion, she delivered a speech to the right-wing Sydney Institute think tank. At the same time as she urged the country to emulate American classroom pledges of allegiance, Plibersek aggressively declared that she made “no apology” for imposing draconian “income management” programs that restricted Aboriginal and other targeted welfare recipients from being able to

choose how to spend their incomes. “Standing by and allowing people to blow their money instead of feeding their kids or paying the rent is not doing anyone any favours,” she stated.

In 2017, Plibersek delivered another speech titled, “Inclusive Citizenship: A Labor Agenda,” which reiterated the call for a pledge of allegiance. She hailed the supposed democratic values upheld by the Australian parliamentary apparatus, saying nothing about either the scaffolding of a police-state by successive Labor and Liberal governments or the ruthless US-led persecution of Australian journalist and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

The Labor parliamentarian, however, denounced China and Russia, the two primary targets of US imperialism, for their “authoritarian forms of government.” Moscow was accused in the speech of “seeking to expand its influence in Europe and the Middle East—and even in the Pacific,” while Beijing was alleged to have shown “a willingness to export its political model to developing countries.”



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