

Shadow ministry reshuffle underscores Australian Labor Party crisis

Mike Head**29 January 2021**

Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese brought forward a reshuffle of his parliamentary frontbench on Thursday in a desperate bid to shore up his increasingly besieged position.

Every aspect of the manoeuvre pointed to a deepening political crisis, not just for his leadership but for Labor and its associated trade union apparatus as a whole, and for the entire capitalist establishment, which has long depended on Labor to contain working class discontent.

Above all, the moves against Albanese reveal concerns in ruling circles that Labor has failed to recover any ground since its May 2019 federal election debacle—its vote plunged to a near-record low of 33 percent, allowing the widely detested and unstable Liberal-National Coalition government to cling to office by a narrow three-seat majority.

The corporate media is currently doing its best to boost Prime Minister Scott Morrison as a political strongman. But there is nervousness that the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout, and the accompanying corporate offensive against workers' jobs, wages and conditions, could trigger a social explosion that would threaten to erupt out of the control of the Labor and union machine, which has provided Morrison with bipartisan backing throughout the pandemic.

For the ruling class, it is necessary to maintain the Labor Party as a viable alternative governing party, in case the Coalition unravels in the face of such a development. It should be remembered that the media, including Rupert Murdoch's outlets, initially backed the coming to office of previous Labor governments—that of Whitlam in 1972, Hawke in 1983 and Rudd in 2007—as a means of containing and stifling working class movements against Coalition governments.

Compounding the instability is the Biden administration's rapid moves to escalate the US confrontation with Beijing. This will place Australia even more on the frontline of a potentially catastrophic and highly unpopular US economic and military conflict with China, Australian capitalism's biggest single export market.

Albanese was compelled to announce the re-arrangement of his shadow ministry on Thursday, two days earlier than intended, because his opponents had leaked key details to the corporate media. That alone indicates his loss of grip over the faction-riddled party leadership.

Albanese's changes were a transparent effort to both sideline his perceived leadership challengers and appeal for the support of big business and the Biden administration. He elevated party deputy leader Richard Marles—who is particularly close to Washington—from defence to take on a super portfolio focused on the "post-COVID-19 recovery" under the title of "national reconstruction," with responsibility for employment relations.

That is, Marles will lead the deepening attack on workers, in close partnership with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), whose secretary Sally McManus was proclaimed by the Morrison government last year to be its BFF ("best friend forever") for enforcing cuts to wages and conditions while billions of dollars were poured into the pockets of the corporate elite.

Marles' promotion was intended also to undercut the standing of two mooted leadership contenders. Tanya Plibersek, who was deputy leader under the most recently failed party leader Bill Shorten from 2013 to 2019, had vocational training and skills stripped out of her education portfolio. Shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers lost some responsibilities for Labor's economic plans to Marles and was relegated to a lowly seventh on the shadow ministry list, despite having a leading portfolio.

In announcing his reshuffle, Albanese again sought to portray himself, and Labor, as the best placed to tighten the US alliance in partnership with Biden's Democratic Party administration.

Albanese even compared himself personally with Biden, the Obama administration's former vice-president, who supposedly defied critics to become his nation's leader. Albanese said his new team would win the next election, regardless of reported internal concerns the party is on track to lose parliamentary seats under his leadership.

“I can think of a couple who told me it was absolutely certain, that Donald Trump would win re-election. Absolutely certain,” Albanese, a former deputy prime minister under Kevin Rudd in 2013, said. “But a bloke who was a former deputy leader and an experienced politician who had held a wide range of portfolios and who was underestimated by some is now president of the US. And I will be the leader of this country after the next election.”

These words were uttered as Biden and his cabinet continued to lay out a big business and militarist agenda, and appeal for bipartisan unity with the Republican Party, seeking to cover up the mounting evidence of its high-level participation in ex-President Trump’s fascist coup bid in the violent storming of the US Capitol on January 6.

Whether Albanese survives the plotting against him or is replaced by one of his rivals, the Labor and union leadership will pursue a similar agenda as Biden, rushing to fully reopen the economy and impose the burden of the ever-more disastrous global pandemic on the working class, while shoring up the political establishment, paving the way for further far-right agitation and mobilisations.

One of the main pretexts for the efforts to dump Albanese is his poor public opinion polling compared to Morrison. As always, media polls are being manipulated and exploited to achieve desired political results. But insofar as the polls provide a pale reflection of the continuing working class disaffection with Labor, the issue is not just Albanese. The Labor and union bureaucracy as a whole has propped up the Coalition government by suppressing all opposition to its measures to bail out the financial elite and restructure the economy at the expense of the working class.

Over the past year, Albanese’s line of “constructive” support for the Morrison government through the 2019-20 bushfire disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic has been Labor’s unanimous response. At the start of last year, Morrison was so loathed for his contemptuous response to the climate change-related bushfire crisis that he could not find people to shake his hand. Then the state and territory Labor government leaders joined hands with Morrison in a de facto coalition “national cabinet,” while the unions went into overdrive to isolate and suppress working class resistance, such as that of the locked-out Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange in outer southwest Sydney.

That is not an aberration. Labor and the unions have played an equally repressive role for decades, especially since the ACTU Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s, which were the vehicles for destroying workers’ jobs and conditions, and breaking up rank-and-file organisations, such as workplace shop committees.

Another revealing aspect of Labor’s reshuffle relates to

the global warming disaster threatening humanity. Having earlier refused to do so, Albanese removed Mark Butler from the climate portfolio and swapped Butler’s post with that of health spokesman Chris Bowen. As a former finance minister and treasurer from the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, Bowen has been assigned the task of presenting climate policy as an “economic opportunity.”

The truth is that none of Labor’s factions have any policies to avert climate change, because that requires a total socialist restructuring of economic life to take control out of the hands of the profit-driven and national-based financial oligarchies.

Again, in line with Biden, Albanese has been seeking to align with those sections of the corporate elite—now including major energy and auto companies—that are turning away from fossil fuels in order to boost their profits in supposedly “greener” industries, while strengthening their geo-strategic interests and derailing the opposition of working class and young people to their destructive activities.

One of the instigators of the moves against Albanese is Joel Fitzgibbon, who quit Labor’s frontbench last November to demand Butler’s axing from the climate portfolio. Fitzgibbon is championing the interests of the coal and gas companies that have significant operations in his Hunter Valley electorate, north of Sydney. He almost lost his seat in 2019, largely due to Labor’s lack of policies for workers, including coal miners, and fears doing so at the next election, which could be held later this year.

For now, Albanese and Bowen are refusing to commit to Fitzgibbon’s demand for Labor to endorse building a gas-fired electricity generator in the Hunter Valley. But Albanese tried to placate the fossil fuel interests by installing Madeline King as Labor’s resources and trade spokesperson. King is one of Labor’s most outspoken supporters of the coal industry.

In an editorial yesterday, Murdoch’s *Australian* cautiously welcomed Albanese’s effort “to restore unity” in Labor’s ranks, because “doing so would make the opposition more competitive and effective in holding the government to account in the interests of the nation.” However, it warned that “shuffling the deck chairs is not enough,” demanding even more explicit pro-business policies from Labor.



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