

Australian election debate showcases right-wing unity between Labor and the Coalition

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The first “leaders debate” of the Australian federal election served only to highlight the fact that neither of the major parties—Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition—has anything to offer working people, with both running their most right-wing campaign in decades.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese and Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison were as one on most of the substantive issues. To the extent that they differed with one another, the contest was over who could stake out the more reactionary, pro-business and militarist policy.

Both took pains to “acknowledge” the purported achievements of their parliamentary opponents and the event was held on a chummy, first-name basis.

The debate, so far the only one scheduled for the election campaign, was held by Sky News and the Brisbane *CourierMail*. They were given exclusive rights, with no other journalists participating and the event broadcast only on Sky, an extreme right-wing channel that a tiny fraction of the population watches. This symbolised the role of Rupert Murdoch, whose media entity owns both outlets, as a kingmaker in the election, together with other corporate chiefs.

Under conditions of a renewed COVID surge, resulting in more than 50,000 infections a day and increasing hospitalisations, the pandemic was referenced only in the past tense. Neither Morrison nor Albanese even mentioned the almost 7,000 unnecessary deaths from the preventable virus. A day later, another 46 deaths have been reported, on top of more than 4,500 in the past three and a half months. This compares with fewer than 2,300 in the first two years of the pandemic, prior to the bipartisan “reopening of the economy.”

The discussion surrounding the economy was just as divorced from reality. Morrison touted a supposed “economic recovery” without any opposition from Albanese, under conditions of massive global economic turbulence, an unprecedented national debt and rapidly rising inflation.

Amid widespread anger over falling real wages and the soaring cost of living, Morrison advanced the threadbare nostrums of “trickle down” economics. Albanese claimed that a Labor government would result in wage increases, but said the ultimate decision would be up to the Fair Work Commission, which has helped keep wages at below-inflation levels for the

past decade. Albanese did not even attempt to explain how, under these conditions, wage rises would occur.

Albanese stressed Labor’s bipartisanship over the past three years. “If the government has had a good idea, we’ve been prepared to embrace it,” he said. He gave as an example Labor’s full backing for various stimulus measures during the COVID crisis, which amounted to a government handout to big business totalling hundreds of billions of dollars.

As further proof of Labor adopting the government’s “good ideas” Albanese pointed to his support for “boat turnbacks,” the policy of forcing asylum-seekers to turn their vessels around on the high seas, violating international law and resulting in the deaths of unknown thousands of refugees.

Against Morrison’s insinuations that Labor had been “soft” on refugees, Albanese recalled that he was deputy prime minister in the Rudd Labor government in 2013 when it resumed the “offshore processing” of asylum-seekers on concentration camps in the Pacific.

“Why is it Scott that you’re always looking for division?” Albanese asked. “The truth is we support boat turnbacks.”

Albanese declared: “Labor does the big things and we also do the big reforms.” He invoked the legacy of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, which deregulated the economy and presided over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs from 1983 to 1996.

Albanese cited Labor’s establishment of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, which has channeled vast sums of public money to the pharmaceutical corporations, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The latter policy, introduced by the Gillard Labor government in 2013, has thrown disability services open to profit-gouging private corporations.

Albanese sought to give his references to “big reforms” a vague, populist colouration, as though they would benefit ordinary people.

But even his reference to the NDIS gave the lie to this. It “certainly isn’t welfare,” he declared. “All of the analysis shows, if you allow everyone to participate in society, you will get ... better economic outcomes.” How forcing the disabled into low-paid employment, which can exacerbate their medical conditions, aids wage growth, Albanese did not explain.

Notably, Morrison acknowledged Labor's record on the "big reforms." He gave credit to Labor's "Julia" [Gillard] and "Bill" [Shorten] for the NDIS, but complained that the Coalition then "have to work out how to pay for these things."

The issue of austerity, with the national debt approaching a trillion dollars, was hinted at in such ways. Albanese condemned the government for "waste." Reading between the lines, this is a clear pitch to business that Labor will implement substantial spending cuts.

Likewise, Albanese called for greater collaboration between big business and the corporatised trade unions, insisting they had common interests and that workers' wages and conditions depend on the profitability of their employers.

The one division was on foreign policy. The day before the debate, China announced it had signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands government.

This, Albanese declared, was a "massive foreign policy failure" by the government. The Coalition had left "our backyard" unsecured, with China set to establish a presence on a Pacific island less than 2,000 kilometres from northern Australia. The Labor leader was harkening back, both to the "yellow peril" anti-Asian racism upon which Labor was founded, and its militarist record during the Pacific war 80 years ago and since.

Albanese's condemnation of the government was a clear pitch to the US: a Labor government would be a better partner in the Biden administration's preparations for war with China, aimed at ensuring the hegemony of American imperialism.

Albanese favourably cited the Biden administration's dispatch to the Solomons of Kurt Campbell, the White House Indo-Pacific coordinator, contrasting that with the Morrison government's decision to send only a junior minister last week. Albanese boasted that he "knows Kurt well." Campbell has been an architect of the vast US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, directed against Beijing.

This warmongering received no challenge in the Sky studio, but it is widely opposed by working people, as are most other official policies.

For the first week-and-a-half of the campaign, Albanese and Morrison's minders have sought to maintain a cordon sanitaire between their leaders and the general public, for fear of the widespread hostility.

Even in the stage-managed debate, the popular anger found a reflection. Faced with criticism from ordinary people, including on severe NDIS cuts, and health and aged care underfunding, Morrison and Albanese had nothing to offer.

A small-business person denounced the immense financial hardship incurred by many in the pandemic. Morrison blithely touted his business tax cuts, with which Albanese agreed. Albanese asserted that "wage growth" would ease the difficulties, again without giving any indication of how Labor would increase pay.

Another audience member pointed to the floods crisis in

Queensland and northern New South Wales (NSW), where ordinary people have been abandoned. First they were compelled to rescue one another and now many victims face destitution. Morrison reeled off various purported funding allocations, basically ignoring the question. Albanese bemoaned the lack of "mitigation" but outlined no concrete policies.

A participant noted that home ownership is now out of the reach of most ordinary people. A speculative frenzy, promoted by Labor and the Coalition, has lifted average house prices above a million dollars.

Morrison touted the government's First Home Guarantee program, which supposedly allows people to enter the property market with only a 5 percent deposit. Recent reports have revealed that to be eligible for the scheme, a single person in NSW needs to have an annual after-tax income of \$149,868, while a couple must earn \$155,934 to qualify.

Albanese repeated a pledge to build 30,000 social housing dwellings over five years. A Deloitte report commissioned by the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue think tank found that 316,000 more community homes are needed in NSW alone by 2036. Building them is estimated to cost \$3.5 billion per year. Greater Western Sydney alone is estimated to have a shortfall of 28,200.

Having pledged a pittance or less, Morrison and Albanese wrung their hands over the widespread "disillusionment" with "our political processes." Everything about the debate showed why millions of workers and young people increasingly recognise that Labor, the Coalition and the entire official political setup are hostile to their interests and offer no way forward.

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