

Australian election “debates”: a display of bipartisan unity

Mike Head, Socialist Equality Party Senate candidate for Queensland
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Last night’s third and final televised election “debate” between Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese was another degrading and revealing spectacle.

The event, only shown after 9.10 pm on a weeknight because of low ratings, began with the two leaders being implored by the host to keep their exchanges “civil” to avoid the desperate shouting match that occurred during the second debate late last Sunday night.

That mud-slinging spectacle had only further discredited both of them, while failing to disguise the reality that the pair were in furious agreement on all the basic issues. They were just vying to prove which could better prosecute the agenda of wage-cutting, austerity and war demanded by the corporate elite and Washington.

Last night’s affair, while described by the compere, the Seven Network’s Mark Riley, as “reasonably polite,” underscored that bipartisan unity, especially on the need to keep suppressing real wages in order to maintain the low-wage economy that has intensified over the past three decades.

Once again, the format, and the exclusion of all other parties, was intended to convince voters they have no “choice” but to support one or other of the two increasingly unpopular parties, which have ruled on behalf of Australian capitalism for the past century, to form another pro-business government after the May 21 election.

The most telling feature of the event was Albanese’s backtracking on comments he had made earlier that Labor would support a 5.1 percent increase to the minimum wage in line with the latest official inflation rate.

His earlier remarks had been an anxious bid to head off explosive working-class discontent, and strikes emerging among nurses, teachers, aged care workers, bus drivers and others, over the decimation of living standards by soaring prices for food, fuel and other essentials, which are rising far above 5.1 percent.

Under fire from big business and its media outlets, which declared that any such rise would trigger a “wages spiral” and “destroy” the economy, however, Albanese quickly dropped all pretence of backing such a rise. That was despite pleading it would mean only “\$1 an hour” for all those on the poverty-line minimum wage of \$20.33 an hour.

Albanese said a Labor government would not actively seek this pitiful increase, but if the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the

national pro-employer industrial tribunal, made a decision to raise wages by that amount “we would absolutely welcome it” because “real workers out there are doing it tough.”

Albanese refused to say if Labor would nominate the \$1 figure, or any other, in a post-election submission to the tribunal. Earlier in the day, Labor’s shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers had already said a Labor government’s submission to the FWC had “yet to be determined.”

It soon became clear that Albanese’s position was the same as Morrison’s. The Coalition leader also refused to commit to any minimum wage rise, agreeing that the FWC was “the right place to do that.” Morrison echoed Albanese, claiming he would “welcome pay rises obviously,” but backing the corporate elite’s demand for further real wage cuts.

The employers’ groups insisted that any rise in real wages would be intolerable and “unsustainable.” The Australian Industry Group has already called on the FWC to award a 2.5 percent rise—less than half the inflation rate—thus deepening the wage-cutting that has been imposed on workers, particularly low-paid workers, since the 1990s.

Calculations and graphs produced by Greg Jericho in the *Guardian* today show that real wages have stagnated for more than 20 years and lagged substantially behind productivity increases, measured in gross domestic product (GDP) per labour hour.

Significantly, this gap began to widen after the Hawke and Keating governments, working in close partnership with the unions, imposed the prices and incomes Accords and enterprise bargaining. They straitjacketed workers in laws that bar all strikes, except during union-controlled “bargaining periods” at individual workplaces.

Yet Albanese’s only “plan”—repeated ad nauseam during the debates—was to drive up productivity, again in “consultation” with the unions and employers. He falsely claimed this would enable wages to rise. As the historical record proves, it means Labor and the unions enforcing an even more ruthless corporate offensive.

Albanese boasted, again and again, that business leaders backed proposals for a Labor government to boost productivity by various means, including infrastructure programs, renewable energy projects and cheaper childcare—while refusing to back the basic right to free childcare.

The truth is that the bottom line of “productivity” is to ratchet up the rate of exploitation of workers’ labour power (GDP per hour), including that of the mothers who would be urged to join the

workforce.

Both Morrison and Albanese underscored their subservience to the fossil fuel-dominated mining industry by ruling out any mining or carbon tax, despite the urgency of the climate crisis.

The next most striking aspect of last night's event was the exclusion of the other burning issues confronting workers and youth. Not a question was asked, nor a word said, about the global COVID-19 pandemic, which is resurging due to the deadly "live with the virus" policies of all capitalist governments. On the same day, officially-recorded daily infections in Western Australia jumped by 40 percent to more than 17,000, as a result of the state's Labor government axing nearly all safety precautions.

Likewise, nothing was said about the housing unaffordability crisis or the conditions facing young people, who are being increasingly pushed into the low-wage "gig economy."

Most revealing of all was the absence of any mention of foreign policy, above all, the escalating US-NATO war against Russia on the pretext of defending Ukraine and the accompanying intensifying preparations for a US-led war against China. In Sunday night's debate, the loudest shouting had been over who was the most committed to the US confrontation with China.

On Sunday, Albanese bragged that the last Labor government, in which he was a key minister, had based US marines in Darwin, while the Coalition government had allowed a Chinese company to lease the strategic city's civilian port. He also reiterated Labor's accusation that Morrison's government had committed the greatest foreign policy failure since World War II by permitting the Solomon Islands government to sign a security agreement with Beijing.

These developments, and the rising danger of the US triggering a third world war by asserting its global hegemony over Russia and China, were buried last night. No one referred to the Coalition's own earlier incendiary declarations of having to "prepare for war" against China and branding Albanese as "China's candidate."

This indicates that plans for a "khaki election" to beat the war drums to divert from the social crisis have backfired, at least so far. There is no widespread support for war, particularly when the Ukraine war is already spiking food and fuel shortages and prices internationally.

Asked about media polls showing up to 30 percent of voters undecided or supporting "other" parties or independents, both Albanese and Morrison decried the "great deal of disillusionment" with their twin parties. Albanese absurdly blamed the "revolving door of leadership" in both parties and "corrupt practices," of which there is no evidence apart from the pork-barrelling that the two parties systematically resort to.

Albanese's only answer was that "a strong national anti-corruption commission" was needed to "restore faith in politics overwhelmingly."

That covers up the real reasons for the disaffection. Above all, they lie in the intensifying gulf between the lives, livelihoods, health and wellbeing of the working-class, the vast majority of the population, and the vast and soaring wealth of the financial elite that has reaped the benefits of the protracted suppression of workers' struggles by Labor and the unions.

A "pub test"—a demeaning concept—of 160 "undecided voters"

gathered by the Seven Network awarded last night's contest to Albanese, with 50 percent saying they were swayed by him, compared to 34 percent for Morrison, with 16 percent remaining unconvinced. In its own small and distorted way, this unconvinced result points to the reality of the ongoing crumbling support for the two-party duopoly.

Fittingly, the underlying unity between the Coalition and Labor was displayed at the end of the debate, when two men were asked to nominate the "redeeming" features of the other.

Morrison said he admired that Albanese "[had] never forgot where he has come from"—he grew up in public housing and showed the ability to "rise to be the leader of one of the oldest parties in this country." In turn, Albanese praised Morrison for being "committed to his nation" and supposedly increasing funding for mental health services.

This clinging together, as Labor and the Coalition have done in the "National Cabinet" throughout the pandemic, underscores the necessity for the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party in this election and beyond to build a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class.

As explained in our election statement, "the SEP is standing candidates in the 2022 election to advance a socialist program of action for workers to fight for their class interests against the relentless assault on their basic social and democratic rights."

We encourage workers and young people who agree with this perspective to contact the SEP today.

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