

# New Australian Liberal leader doubles down on “prepare for war” call

Mike Head  
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Yesterday’s unopposed installation of former Defence Minister Peter Dutton as the new leader of the Liberal Party marks a further sharp shift to the right, and toward the agenda of war and austerity, by Australia’s entire political establishment.

Dutton is the leader of the Liberals’ most right-wing conservative faction. He is even more known for his authoritarian, militarist and war-mongering anti-China positions than the man he replaced—ex-Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who quit immediately in response to his government’s defeat.

Dutton’s unanimous election by the surviving Liberal parliamentarians came barely a week after the May 21 federal election produced the lowest combined vote for the two main parties of capitalist rule in Australia, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, since World War II.

This has produced an historic political crisis. With nearly 20 percent of votes still to be counted, it seems that the Labor Party will form a government with a wafer-thin majority of one or two seats in the 151-member House of Representatives. But it won less than a third of the votes.

The Coalition’s primary vote crashed by more than 5 percentage points, with its support base disintegrating in the country’s most affluent electorates. Yet Labor’s primary vote also fell to a new near-century low. It lost another 0.57 percentage points to go below the 33 percent recorded in Labor’s historic debacle at the 2019 election.

In another sign of the political turmoil produced by the election result, the regional agribusiness-based Nationals dumped their leader Barnaby Joyce, a fossil fuel advocate and known opponent of any carbon emission reduction targets. A marathon meeting of the party’s members of parliament yesterday elected David Littleproud, a former banker, to replace Joyce.

The most significant feature of Dutton’s first media conference yesterday as the Liberal leader was his defiant defence of his incendiary anti-China agitation in the lead-up to the election, during which he said the country had to “prepare for war” against China.

Asked by a journalist about his “strong statements” on China, Dutton declared: “I don’t resile from those because I feel very passionately about this issue.” He insisted: “The issue of China under President Xi is the biggest issue our country will face in our lifetimes. That’s the reality. That’s the assessment of the American, British, Japanese, Indians and it’s our assessment as well.”

Dutton’s reference to the US and its allies is another sign of the message that US President Joe Biden’s administration underscored at last week’s Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit in Tokyo, which incoming Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese rushed to attend.

That message, amplified in a subsequent speech by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, is that Washington identifies China as the greatest threat to the Indo-Pacific and global hegemony that US imperialism asserted after World War II, and expects its allies to line up accordingly.

Dutton hailed the AUKUS military alliance of the US, UK and Australia against China, including Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered long-range submarines and hypersonic missiles, as an “incredible achievement” of the Morrison government. He said he would support the Labor government in “rolling out” AUKUS, which will cost tens of billions of dollars.

Dutton was the most vociferous anti-China spokesman of the Morrison government. Last month, speaking on the annual Anzac Day war memorial day, Dutton accused China of taking a similar path to Nazi Germany in the lead-up to World War II, and seeing other countries in the region, including Australia, as “tributary states.” Last October, he said Australia would back any US war against China over Taiwan.

Notably, Albanese, who has unequivocally committed his government to the Biden administration’s escalating moves against China, sprang to Dutton’s defence last week as soon as it was clear that Dutton would be unopposed as the Liberal leader.

“I have a much better relationship with Peter Dutton than I had with Scott Morrison,” Albanese said. “Peter Dutton has

never broken a confidence that I've had with him."

Dutton's other main pitch at his media conference was a right-wing populist one, seeking to exploit the mass discontent toward the bipartisan Labor-Coalition big business program, and the soaring cost of living for workers, that was expressed in a limited and distorted form in the election.

Dutton is clearly conscious of the collapse in Labor's support, especially in outer suburban working-class areas, and the implications that has for the stability of the capitalist political order. He repeatedly noted that Labor's primary vote fell "in many seats right across the country."

In response to the breakdown of support for Labor, as well as the Liberals, Dutton is setting out to take the Coalition in a more alt-right, Trump-style direction in order to build a social base for the corporate agenda of militarism and slashing social spending.

Dutton said his leadership would "focus" on "small and micro businesses" and "aspirational hard-working 'forgotten people' across the cities, suburbs, regions and in the bush." He said: "They feel the system is against them and I want to be a voice for them."

In order to make that appeal, the Liberal leader hypocritically sought to distance himself from the corporate elite, saying it had a closer relationship with Labor and other parties. At the same time he hastened to add: "I don't seek an adversarial relationship with big business, not at all. I work closely with every Australian, but my focus is on small business."

A former police officer with many connections inside the military-state apparatus, Dutton has a long history of trying to whip up anti-immigrant and other reactionary prejudices to divide and disorient workers.

In 2016, he declared it was a mistake to admit Lebanese Muslim immigrants. In 2018, he claimed that "African gang violence" would cause deaths in Victoria. That year also, as home affairs minister in charge of immigration, he called for a special "refugee" immigration intake for Afrikaners from South Africa.

Dutton has been a spearhead in tearing up basic democratic rights. At his media conference, he boasted of his role in repelling refugee boats—a violation of international law—and in deporting thousands of non-citizens, many of them Maoris from New Zealand, who had been convicted of crimes.

His record includes burying even the token recommendations made by an official inquiry into war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan, and joking about "water lapping" Pacific islands as a result of global warming.

Dutton gave an early sign of how he will try to cynically

capitalise on Labor's post-election demand for "sacrifices" from workers to drive up productivity and pay off the giant budget deficits incurred by propping up big business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. He accused Albanese of deceiving workers by not asking the Fair Work Commission for a 5.1 percent increase to the minimum wage to match the official inflation rate.

Last Friday, the Labor government lodged a submission to the pay tribunal that supported a rise for the lowest-paid workers, but did not include a figure as to how much the minimum wage should increase, effectively dumping Albanese's election promise to back a 5.1 percent rise.

"Anthony Albanese looked Australian workers in the eye and said that he would absolutely support the 5.1 per cent increase in wages," Dutton said. "He looked workers in the eye and he has lied to workers."

That is a taste of how the Coalition will falsely posture as a friend of "working people" as the Labor government, employing the services of the trade unions, moves to impose on the working class the burden of the deepening global economic crisis.

To give the Coalition's right-wing shift a feminist gloss, ex-environment and health minister Sussan Ley was elected Liberal deputy leader, and an almost totally unknown senator, Perin Davey, a former water lobbyist, was elected as Nationals deputy leader.

For immediate electoral purposes, both Dutton and Littleproud, the new Nationals leader, said they would represent what Littleproud called the "sensible centre," not the right-wing factions they rest on.

Rifts are likely to continue to wrack the Coalition, however, as they did in the dying months of the Morrison government. Most immediately, Littleproud is demanding an increase from five to six in the numbers of Nationals in the shadow cabinet, as part of a renegotiated coalition pact.

That demand reflects the Liberals' loss of at least 15 members of parliament in the election. The Nationals now have proportionately greater numbers in the Coalition because they lost no seats, even though the majority of its MPs also suffered swings against them.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will be discussing the election outcome and the way forward for the working class at an online public meeting Sunday, June 12 at 2 p.m. (AEST). Register now to attend this important meeting.



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