

Australia: A revealing bipartisan parliamentary love fest

Mike Head

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An exchange of appreciation at the end of the parliamentary year between Australian Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Liberal-National Coalition opposition leader Peter Dutton provided an insight into the real relations within the political establishment, confronted by mounting political disaffection.

Thursday's reciprocal greetings on the floor of the House of Representatives went significantly beyond the customary exchange of pleasantries to wrap up the final parliamentary session before the long Christmas summer holiday break.

There was a definite air of closing ranks in the face of broad social and political discontent, not least over the bipartisan backing for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the intensifying preparations for a US-led war against China, the resurgence of the unchecked COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening cost-of-living crisis for working-class households.

Beyond wishing Dutton and his family well, Albanese extended his thanks to Dutton for the private conversations and deliberations they conducted behind the backs of the population. The extent of their secret collaborations was revealed when Albanese emphasised that this "engagement" wildly exceeded that of his three years as opposition leader under the previous Coalition government, then led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

"I think that, in spite of other things I say publicly, what I say privately is that we are always able to engage," Albanese stated. "I've had more conversations with you in a month than I had in the previous three years, when I was in your position, with my counterpart. You need to be able to talk in a civil way even when there are disagreements, and we're able to do that."

Dutton was just as grateful for their collaboration. Also going beyond his Christmas well wishes to Albanese and his family, Dutton said:

"I want to say thank you very much, prime minister, for the engagement we've been able to have. As you point out, there's rightly a robust, adversarial nature to this chamber, and, for better or worse, that's the part that the Australian

public sees, but there is a lot we're able to resolve and there are issues that we can work on for the betterment of our country, and I thank you for that engagement."

As this exchange shows, for all the feigned public stoushes between Labor and the openly right-wing Coalition, particularly when the cameras are broadcasting the parliamentary sessions, they agree fundamentally. They work together, both publicly and behind closed doors, to shore up the parliamentary façade behind which the dictates of the ruling capitalist class are imposed.

All the more revealing in this respect was that these remarks followed a day in which Labor and the Coalition had teamed up to ram through parliament in record time and without a semblance of debate, two sweeping detention and citizenship-cancellation bills, overturning fundamental legal and democratic rights.

Thursday's exchange was between two equally and increasingly unpopular figures, both of whose media poll ratings are deeply negative. Moreover, Albanese's government faces defeat at the next election, due in 2025, or at least being forced into a shaky coalition government, possibly with the Greens.

The polls indicate that Labor's electoral support has fallen even below the 32.5 percent that it obtained to scrape into office at the last election in May 2022. But there has been no lift in support for Dutton or the Coalition, whose voting base substantially imploded at that election.

This is just one measure of a deepening political crisis, not only for the Labor government but the parliamentary establishment as a whole. There is a growing gulf between the pro-war and austerity program being implemented by the Labor government and shared by the Coalition and the bitter social and political shocks being experienced, especially by workers and young people.

Narrowly elected just over 18 months ago on the fraudulent slogan of "a better future," the Labor government has presided over the greatest cut to working-class living standards since World War II. It has also made an escalated commitment to US militarism, including in Gaza, Ukraine

and the escalating confrontation with China, threatening a catastrophic nuclear war.

With Labor governments in office in every mainland state and territory as well, the corporate and financial elite has depended heavily on Labor, supported by its affiliated trade union apparatuses, to enforce this program, but this capacity is being rapidly exhausted.

Among the many indicators was the overwhelming defeat of Labor's October 14 referendum to entrench an indigenous Voice institution in the country's colonial-era 1901 Constitution. This was Albanese's signature policy, seeking to put a progressive gloss on his government's reactionary agenda, for both domestic and international war preparation purposes.

The referendum defeat revealed a stark class divide. Working-class voters rejected the fraudulent claim that the same government and political establishment that is preparing for war against China and slashing working-class conditions would rectify the appalling conditions of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

That blow to the government and its supporters was also compounded by widespread disgust at the Albanese government's unconditional line-up, starting that same week, behind the Israeli regime as it launched its massacre in Gaza, backed to the hilt by the Biden administration in Washington and every other imperialist government.

Over the past two months, weekly mass protests against the ever-escalating Zionist onslaught have been held across Australia, only to see the barbarism worsen and the Labor government continue to support the ethnic cleansing operation in Gaza.

The resulting outrage throughout working-class areas has been compounded by the growing wave of COVID-19 infections, let rip by the Labor governments, and the mounting social and housing crisis.

This week's National Accounts, the Bureau of Statistics' most comprehensive set of economic data, showed that real household disposable income, a measure of living standards, fell 5.6 percent over the year to September 30 and 8.3 percent over two years. That underestimates the impact on working-class people, who are being hit hardest by the soaring costs of food and other essentials, rents and mortgage payments, that far exceed any wage rises.

Plus, the Labor government scrapped the previous Coalition government's Low and Middle-Income Tax Offset. This added thousands of dollars to the income tax bills of workers even as the government is still pledging to deliver huge "Stage 3" income tax cuts to the wealthiest layers of society next year.

Financial stress, homelessness, poverty and reliance on charity food banks are skyrocketing. With the government's

support, the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has deliberately inflicted this pain via 13 interest rate rises. According to the RBA's latest report, millions of variable rate borrowers, about one in five, are spending more than 30 percent of their income on mortgage payments—the accepted measure of "housing stress."

Taken together, this cut to working-class conditions is nearly reaching the level of the global Great Depression of the 1930s, when wages in Australia were cut by 10 percent or more in 1931 via the so-called Premiers' Plan, also implemented by Labor governments.

If Dutton, a widely-reviled figure, can seek to profit from the collapse in the Labor government's support, it is precisely because Labor has taken further the militarist and austerity measures of the Morrison Coalition government, in which Dutton was a key figure.

Dutton, like Trump in the US, personifies the threat of authoritarian rule. Yet this is part of a wider lurch to the right in official politics. Around the globe, the capitalist class is turning toward dictatorial forms of rule and fascist parties, as in Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and Argentina.

The ruling class fears the strikes and protests that have erupted internationally over the attacks on living standards and democratic rights, as well as against the naked US-backed Israeli barbarism in Gaza.

As the exchange between Albanese and Dutton demonstrates, however, the Labor Party is no alternative. It represents the capitalist class no less than the Coalition. All the claims by pseudo-left groups that Labor is a "lesser evil," which can be pressured to change its policies, are political poison. In fact, by straitjacketing and suppressing the struggles of workers, with the help of these same groups, Labor and the union bureaucrats are paving the way for Dutton.

The only alternative is the development of a new socialist, internationalist and revolutionary leadership in the working class. That means building the Socialist Equality Party.



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