

Australian by-election campaign underscores crisis of political establishment

Patrick O'Connor
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A federal by-election this Saturday, March 2, in the outer southeastern Melbourne electorate of Dunkley, has become a test of the survival of the Albanese Labor government as well as that of the equally unpopular opposition Liberal Party.

The by-election was called after the death of incumbent Labor member Peta Murphy. A loss for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese would reduce Labor's slim parliamentary majority from two seats to just one, raising the spectre of an unstable minority government if another seat fell.

Less than two years after just scraping into office, the Labor government is already mired in crisis. The May 2022 federal election saw Labor's primary vote plunge below 33 percent, the lowest in nearly a century, reflecting the party's rupture with the working class, its historical constituency, after decades of implementing right-wing, pro-business policies and backing for US militarism.

Albanese gained office only because of the enormous hostility to the previous Scott Morrison-led Liberal-National government. Since doing so, he has led another Labor government aligned with finance capital, the ultra-wealthy and Washington's war agenda.

In fact, the government has further deepened Australian imperialism's integration with the US war machine, expanding the American military-intelligence presence in the country, advancing the AUKUS alliance that is preparing to wage war on China, and supporting the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Domestically, the government has engineered record social inequality by boosting corporate profits while imposing a cost-of-living crisis on working-class households.

Labor holds Dunkley by 6.3 percentage points. Media opinion polls anticipate that Labor will lose votes but not the seat. Yet, national media polls published today

report that Labor's support has fallen below that of the Liberal-National Coalition. That is despite the government's desperate recent manoeuvre to appease discontent by rejigging planned "Stage 3" income tax cuts to offer pittances of about \$2 a week to workers, while still much more benefitting high-income recipients.

If Labor retains the seat, it will reflect deep hostility toward the Liberal Party headed by Peter Dutton. The Liberals, together with the opposition-aligned Advance Australia campaign organisation, are attempting to whip up a reactionary "law and order" campaign. Tens of thousands of dollars are being spent on leaflets and online advertisements associating asylum seekers and migrants with crime, and accusing the Labor government of being "soft" on so-called border security.

Advance Australia has also highlighted the reaction of Labor candidate Jodie Belyea to the overwhelming referendum defeat last October of the government's proposal to entrench an indigenous Voice body in the country's 1901 Constitution. In a social media post after the referendum, Belyea described the result as a display of "the worst of white privilege in this country."

The remark underscores the racialist character of Labor's Voice proposal which aimed at elevating a narrow elite layer of wealthy Aborigines in order to provide a progressive gloss for Australian capitalism. The referendum was defeated not, as Belyea, the Voice proponents and other Labor supporters insinuate, because the population is racist but rather because of the widespread understanding in working-class areas that the mechanism would do nothing to improve the lives of ordinary Aborigines.

The Liberal Party is desperate to regain ground in

Melbourne. The city is one of the sharpest expressions of the implosion of the party's traditional electoral base in affluent suburbs. With a population exceeding 5 million, the opposition holds just 3 of the city's 22 seats.

Dunkley is regarded as a "swing" seat, covering both working-class suburbs in the northern and central parts, such as Carrum Downs and Frankston, and wealthy bayside suburbs in the south, notably Mount Eliza.

The Liberal Party previously held the electorate from 1996 to 2019. The *Melbourne Age* recently quoted an unnamed "Liberal insider" saying: "If we can't get close in seats like Dunkley, where the hell are we meant to win?"

A by-election loss for the opposition this Saturday will likely raise questions about Dutton's leadership. It would follow the Liberal Party's by-election defeat last April in the outer northeastern Melbourne seat of Aston, which the Liberals had held since 1990. That result marked the first time since 1920 that the leading parliamentary opposition party lost a seat to a government in a federal by-election.

But the Labor government's support has plummeted since then, not least because of the cost-of-living crisis, its Voice referendum debacle, the allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS nuclear-powered attack submarines and other weaponry for use against China, and its complicity in the US-backed Israeli atrocities in Gaza.

The Dunkley by-election more broadly underscores the crisis of the entire Australian political establishment.

There is enormous disaffection and hostility which sections of the media have nervously registered. An Australian Broadcasting Corporation report last Thursday noted: "Some on the streets of Frankston were blissfully unaware a by-election was even happening." It added that pollsters had "also found a similar level of disengagement in Dunkley, which they say is surprising, even for a by-election." Former Labor staffer Kos Samaras commented: "I think the electorate is extremely disinterested."

In reality, this "disengagement" reflects growing political disaffection. Working-class people in the area, as throughout Australia, confront unbearable economic and social pressures.

According to the latest data, more than 80 percent of

mortgage holders and 75 percent of renters in Carrum Downs experience "negative cash flow," defined as their total weekly expenses exceeding their total weekly earnings. Thousands of people, in other words, are eating into their limited savings, foregoing paying bills, adding to credit card and other debts, and relying on Foodbank and other charity services.

None of the various other candidates contesting the Dunkley by-election, such as the Greens and so-called independents, advance a program to resolve the social crisis or oppose the US-led turn to war. On the contrary, they are seeking to divert and channel the discontent back into dead-end parliamentary channels.

This includes the middle-class pseudo-left organisation Victorian Socialists (VS), the electoral front of the so-called Socialist Alternative group. VS is a parliamentary opportunist organisation, modelled on the likes of Greece's SYRIZA, Spain's Podemos and the Democratic Socialists of America. These organisations have all served to mislead and betray the working class, propping up the major bourgeois parties.

In Dunkley, VS has campaigned on the issue of the Gaza genocide. Opposition to war, however, is raised only from the standpoint of appealing to, and trying to pressure, the Labor government to change course, flying in the face of its ongoing commitment to Washington and the Zionist regime in Israel.

Above all, the VS campaign seeks to divert the deep hostility toward war and militarism within the working class back behind the Labor government, trying to prop it up as its support implodes, and blocking the development of the revolutionary socialist perspective that is required to end the genocide and overturn the capitalist system that is responsible for the barbarism.



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