

Australian election debate marked by lies, banalities and evasions

Max Boddy, SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW
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The first leaders' debate for the May 3 Australian federal election summed up the official campaign as a whole. On the part of Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition and the corporate media, it is an election of paltry promises, flat out lies and a desperate attempt to conceal from the population the enormous social, political, economic and military shocks that are to come, whichever party takes office.

Last night's debate took the contradiction between reality and the official campaign to new heights or lows.

It was less than a week after US President Trump's announcement of unprecedented trade war measures targeting the entire world. It is obvious that the tariffs will depress a world economy already in a slump. It is openly discussed in ruling circles that Trump's "Liberation Day" marks the definitive end of the post-World War Two order, heralding a return to the conditions of the 1930s.

In this situation, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his Liberal-National Coalition opponent Peter Dutton literally spent much of the debate haggling over small change. Each touted their miserable cost-of-living promises as a means of alleviating the deep-going social crisis, something that nobody believes.

The election was a crisis for the major parties and the political establishment, even before the bomb let-off by Trump. Labor went into the campaign polling less than 30 percent in the primary vote, amid widespread anger over its imposition of the biggest reversal to living standards in at least 80 years, combined with hostility to its complicity in the Gaza genocide and its massive spending on militarism and war.

The first week-and-a-half of the campaign, however, has been dominated by the shambles of Dutton and the Coalition. Having spent months promising that they would announce costed policies closer to the election, they still have not.

Over the weekend, Dutton walked back two of his only concrete policies in humiliating fashion.

He abandoned a plan to end all work from home arrangements for federal public sector workers. Polling had

shown that broad sections of the population were fearful this would be extended nationally, including in the private sector, under conditions where they have used a degree of flexibility provided by such arrangements to try and offset the cost-of-living crisis, through reductions in travel, childcare and other expenses.

Dutton also shelved a proposal to sack 41,000 public sector workers over five years in similar fashion. He has not yet abandoned an uncoded proposal to build a nuclear power sector, which experts have branded as completely unviable, but is avoiding discussion of the policy at all costs.

The series of about faces point to the fact that any association with Trump or Trumpian policies is political poison, under conditions where a clear majority of the population is hostile to the fascistic US leader and fearful of what his rule will bring.

At the same time, the Coalition's diminished standing reflects a shift in the corporate elite and its major publications. They have increasingly shifted behind Labor. While expressing frustration over its inability to implement the scale of austerity measures demanded, important sections of the bourgeoisie appear to view Labor as the best option they have and the most likely to scrape in and form a majority government.

The format of the debate pointed to the degraded state of Australian political life. It was hosted exclusively by Sky News, meaning that in most parts of the country, you had to pay to watch it. Sky is the most rabidly right-wing section of the official media, frequently peddling Trumpian talking points, alt-right conspiracy theories and obsessively supporting Israel's slaughter of Palestinian women and children.

Albanese and Dutton gave Sky a chance to burnish its populist credentials, with the Murdoch network organising the debate as a "people's forum," with purportedly non-committed voters in working-class western Sydney.

Try as they might to exclude the global crisis, it inevitably intruded, with the first question being how both leaders would respond to Trump's trade war.

Albanese absurdly claimed that Australia was “well positioned” to cope with an all-out economic war. In reality, China, the central target of Trump’s measures, is Australian capitalism’s largest trading partner, and takes in a third of its exports. A further slowdown in China will have catastrophic economic consequences in Australia.

Albanese claimed that Australia could diversify its trading relationships, particularly in this region, but the south-east Asian nations he was referencing have been hit the hardest, with most suffering a US tariff of between 20 and 50 percent.

Dutton said that he would be “strong” in defending the “national interest,” and would “stand up to bullies.” He repeated his talking point that the Coalition could negotiate an Australian exemption to any US tariffs, which is implausible given that they have been applied universally.

The unreality of those responses set the stage for the entire debate. Both claimed that under their leadership, the Australian economy would improve, the cost-of-living crisis would end, and all would be well. In reality, they both know that a deep recession is likely. The Australian economy would already be in a formal recession but for population growth.

Having dispensed with the world situation with a few lies and absurdities, Albanese and Dutton began touting their cost-of-living policies. Labor is proposing a tax cut which would save working people just five dollars a week, beginning next year. Dutton is putting forward a one-year decrease to the fuel excise, of almost identical value.

The policies are a contemptible farce. Workers’ average purchasing power has declined by 9 percent since 2019, the highest level in the OECD. Mortgages have increased by more than a thousand dollars a month, rents are at unprecedented levels, as are all other costs of essentials. The tax cut versus fuel excise cut cannot even be described as crumbs, but as miniscule scraps.

In response to a question on the growing cost of healthcare, Albanese again theatrically waved his Medicare card around, as though it were some kind of magic wand. Dutton made the obvious point that rates of Medicare subsidised bulk-billing appointments have plummeted over the past three years, to which Albanese had no response.

Both touted their commitment to “fully fund” public education in several years time. But that “full funding” is to meet the inadequate Gonski standards, which were always intended to slash public education expenditure. Labor and Coalition governments have overseen the development of one of the most privatised education systems of an advanced economy, and public schools are in a meltdown, with overcrowding and teachers leaving the profession in droves.

Albanese claimed his government would solve the housing

crisis, but his keynote policy is to build 30,000 “social and affordable” dwellings over the decade. Charity groups say that over the same period, the shortfall of such dwellings will be well in excess of half a million.

Dutton, a former property developer, scapegoated international students and immigrants for the housing crisis caused by governments and property developers. Albanese countered that his government had already dramatically decreased international student numbers, without the support of the Coalition.

With a world at war, there was a single question on militarism, with a young person asking why Australia was supporting Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Albanese absurdly stated his support for a “ceasefire,” under conditions where Israel has just flagrantly violated one, and for a “two-state solution,” when Israel and the US are completing the ethnic-cleansing of Palestine. He flat out lied in denying that Australia supplies weapons to the Israeli Defence Forces.

The most fundamental question of war, Australia’s frontline role in the preparations for a US-led conflict with China, did not receive a mention. Both, however, professed their support for the defence force and the US alliance, because the plans for such a war are totally bipartisan.

An associated crackdown on anti-war sentiment, expressed most sharply in the repression of opponents of the Gaza genocide, has been overseen by Albanese.

There is not a sliver of difference between the major parties on the necessity for massive “budget repair,” i.e., cuts to essential social spending, to pay for an increase to military expenditure and to force the working class to pay for the economic crisis.

The debate confirmed the central point raised by the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign: this election will resolve nothing for ordinary people; the real issue is to build an independent movement of the working class fighting for a socialist perspective against Labor, the Liberals and a capitalist system hurtling towards war, austerity and dictatorship.

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