

Australian Liberal leader launches tirade against immigrants in budget reply

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Liberal Party leader Angus Taylor used his speech last night, replying to the Labor government's budget, to carry out a frothing attack on immigrants. The address was less an outline of economic policy, and more a political signal that the Liberals and their Coalition partners in the Nationals are shifting to a Trumpian "Australia First" appeal.

That is one expression of a massive lurch to the right by the entire political establishment. There was a sense in which Taylor was straining to outflank Labor from the right, given the utterly reactionary character of its own policies.

Taylor did not criticise the centrepiece of Labor's budget, the assault on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) whose funding is being slashed by \$35-\$38 billion in four years, the largest single cut to a government program in Australian history. There is more than a whiff of fascism to that policy, based on kicking up to 300,000 disabled people off their supports and slashing payments to the remaining participants, in a move that will ruin lives and result in deaths.

Instead, Taylor called for a similar offensive to be launched against immigrants, who are already being scapegoated for the social crisis by the Labor government and are subjected to a raft of discriminatory policies.

What Taylor outlined, however, would go even further. It was a call for a mass crackdown that would entail a police-state assault on the democratic rights of the entire working class, and that would be unmistakably racist in character.

The purported 75,000 people who have overstayed temporary visas, having failed to navigate the often Kafkaesque immigration bureaucracy, would be subjected to immediate deportation, Taylor declared.

That could only be carried out through widescale raids of workplaces and working-class communities, similar to the rampage by President Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the establishment of mass detention facilities.

Taylor was not only attacking so-called "illegal" immigrants, but also those who have a valid visa and even permanent residency in Australia. Non-citizens would be

immediately excluded from receiving all government benefits and assistance, Taylor declared.

"My message is this: If you commit to Australia, then Australia will commit to you," Taylor said. "After all, the taxes paid by hard working Australians should support Australians." Those are only two of a series of lines he delivered, in his budget reply and follow-up interviews that were both false and had a clear xenophobic character to them.

Taylor, the scion of a wealthy farming family who studied economics at Oxford under a Rhodes scholarship, is no doubt aware that non-citizens pay taxes.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation after his speech, Taylor defended the policy, saying migrants were rushing to Australia to immediately access welfare. In reality, new migrants are already denied the poverty-level unemployment payment for up to four years after their arrival, in what is already a brutal attack on their social rights.

The threats to subject many immigrants to even greater pauperism were connected to a demand that they "make a choice" as to whether they are "committed" to Australia. People had been "let into the country," he stated, who do not share "our values."

That is the hyper-nationalist line that non-citizens are potentially "disloyal" or an "enemy" within. It is a vicious attack on the more than 1 million permanent migrants who are not citizens. It is also a threat to the entire population. The suggestion that citizenship and democratic rights are tied to "values" is a declaration that those who do not subscribe to the Coalition's pro-business, pro-war and anti-working class "values" should be deprived of basic civil liberties.

Above all, Taylor thundered that a Coalition government would carry out "one of the largest cuts to immigration in Australian history."

Taylor declared that migration levels would be pegged directly to the completion of new houses built, scapegoating "foreigners" for the massive housing affordability crisis.

That is based on a lie. The unaffordability crisis is a product of the dominance of property developers, investors and the banks over the housing market, which they have inflated with the aid of bipartisan government policies to make vast profits. And it is the outcome of a continual erosion of real wages, overseen by pro-business Coalition and Labor governments, working with the corporations and the trade union bureaucracy.

Taylor was hazy on the extent of the cut he was proposing, but when pressed in follow-up interviews indicated it would be a reduction of at least 40 percent on current figures, implying a cut of more than 100,000 per year. Such a policy would do nothing to address the housing crisis, but would almost certainly induce a recession and a workforce shortage across key industries.

Taylor's speech was not a coherent economic plan, but an unmistakable pitch to far-right and racist layers, and those sections of the ruling elite looking to the creation of an alt-right or fascist movement. He spouted other talking points appealing to such forces, including denunciations of any measures to address climate change and a pledge to crackdown further on miserable welfare payments.

Leaders of the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation, Pauline Hanson and Barnaby Joyce, who until his defection last year was a colleague of Taylor's in the Coalition, crowed after the speech that Taylor was adopting their policies, which is unquestionably the case.

The speech was a signal of the direction of the Coalition, following the installation of Taylor as Liberal leader in February and of Matt Canavan as Nationals head the following month. Both are associated with more hard-right elements of the Coalition.

They have come to leadership amid what is an existential crisis for the Coalition and particularly for the Liberal Party. In last year's federal election, the Liberals received the worst result since their founding in 1944, retaining just nine of 88 metropolitan seats, despite being the traditional urban conservative party.

Over the ensuing year, the crisis has only deepened, reaching a new stage with the by-election last Saturday for the seat of Farrer, which was held by Sussan Ley until her resignation from parliament following Taylor's ousting of her as Liberal leader.

In the by-election, the Liberals received just 12.4 percent of the vote, a swing against them of 31 percent in 12 months. The seat was secured by One Nation candidate David Farley, in a contest against another populist, independent candidate Michelle Milthorpe. Coalition leaders responded to the result by declaring they would not rule out forming a government with One Nation, and Taylor has followed that up with a speech that could have been delivered by Hanson.

Whatever the twists and turns, that signifies the death of the Coalition as a broad-church conservative party. The social base for such politics, of a relatively large and stable middle-class, no longer exists after decades of social polarisation. That has resulted in continuous splits and fracturing in the Coalition, but the line of march, to the right, is clear.

Labor leaders responded to Taylor by accusing him of "dog-whistling." The accusation is true, but utterly hypocritical given the vast shift to the right by Labor itself.

A party founded in support of the racist program of "White Australia," over the past four years in government Labor has deepened the decades-long assault on refugees and immigrants. That included the passage in 2024 of Trumpian anti-immigration legislation, providing for mass deportations, and powers to ban immigrations from designated countries.

Labor has deepened Australia's alignment with American imperialism, marching in lockstep with Trump including in his utterly criminal assault on Iran and the preparations for a catastrophic conflict with China.

That has gone hand in hand with a militarist assault on democratic rights, including a McCarthyite witch hunt against purported "Chinese influence" in Australian society, and a vicious campaign against mass opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, including through the passage of laws that could ban anti-war political organisations and bar all public protests.

Taylor simply outlined in particularly open and gratuitous form the turn to authoritarianism by the entire political establishment, in Australia and internationally, amid a breakdown of the capitalist system. The alternative is the development of a socialist movement of the working class, against the plunge into war. Such a movement must oppose all forms of xenophobia and insist on the democratic right of all ordinary people, including to live and work wherever they choose with immediate full citizenship rights.



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