2025 MID-YEAR REVIEW

Featuring: Kos Samaras, Frank Bongiorno, Priya Brown and John Phillimore

THE TOCSIN

FLAGSHIP PUBLICATION OF THE
JOHN CURTIN RESEARCH CENTRE
Labor ideas for a better Australia

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Contents

The Tocsin | Issue 23, 2025

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Editorial

Nick Dyrenfurth

As readers are aware, in its ninth year of existence, the John Curtin Research Centre has well and truly consolidated its reputation as Australia's boldest and best labourite thinktank. Our mission remains steadfast: to shape the national debate and develop daring, forward-looking policies so that all Australians—regardless of postcode—can live better, longer and more fulfilling lives. In 2025, amid growing geopolitical instability, climate pressure, and the persistence of inequality, our mission – waging the battle of ideas – is as vital than ever.

This 23rd edition of The Tocsin is testament to that resolve. Inside, you'll find timely and rigorous analyses of the landmark 2025 federal election—an outcome that not only reshaped the political map, but reaffirmed Australians' faith in a centre-left, social democratic vision. We're proud to publish the work of Kos Samaras, Frank Bongiorno, Dominic Meagher and Jonte Verwey, each offering unique perspectives on the result and what it means for our movement.

Professor Bongiorno deftly unpacks the historical and electoral significance of Labor's emphatic win—the first back-to-back federal victory by a Labor PM since Bob Hawke in 1984, explaining the collapse of the Coalition under Peter Dutton, the mixed fortunes of the Greens and independents, and Labor's strong urban performance. Kos, meanwhile, draws on his unparalleled polling knowledge to track the social and structural shifts that shaped the Liberal's electoral implosion. One of our young Curtin Scholars, Townsville-based Jonte Verwey argues for renewed Labor engagement with regional Australia. He highlights the importance of quality candidates, early preselection, and localised campaigning. Drawing on results in Leichhardt, Braddon, and Lingiari, he urges Labor to deepen its roots in the bush and regions—where the party was born—to sustain and grow its mandate. In geo-political terms, Dominic explores how international turbulence – Chinese naval manoeuvres and tensions in the Indo-Pacific, Donald Trump's trade war, and Putin's Indonesian provocations – framed the 2025 election. He praises Labor's calm, disciplined response and strategic realism, contrasting it with the Coalition's erratic, Trump-aligned posture. He also reflects on AUKUS and Australia's need for sovereign and regional defence strategies amid declining trust in the US. Together, these contributions form a compelling narrative of where Australian Labor stands and what's required next.

Elsewhere, Professor John Phillimore, Executive Director of the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, analyses the 2025 West Australian election, where Labor's Roger Cook convincingly won a third term. Despite a swing against it, Labor retained most seats due to disarray within the Liberals and strong economic management. Phillimore charts the state's transformation into a solid Labor stronghold, arguing that WA now resembles South Australia politically.

We are also pleased to reproduce Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles's excellent keynote to our 2025 Gala Dinner held in Melbourne in March in which he contrasted Labor's leadership on national security with Coalition neglect. He outlines the Albanese government's strategic defence achievements, including submarine acquisition, regional diplomacy, and capability investment, framing it all in Curtin's patriotic tradition.

Frank Bongiorno gets another guernsey by way of publishing his 2025 Creswick-Clunes ALP Curtin Oration reflecting on the meaning of Curtin's legacy in today's world. He links the wartime PM's blend of realism and idealism with modern challenges—from democratic decay to economic insecurity. And yours truly has a piece, too, in which I call on the AFL to introduce a Mental Health Round, leveraging the sport's influence to raise awareness around suicide.

We are also delighted to publish fine book reviews by two other young Curtin Scholars, David Connah and Aman Gaur. Connah reviews Freedman's scathing critique of policy dysfunction in the UK, *Failed State*. He lauds the book's readability and relevance, drawing cautionary parallels for Australia about the consequences of poor policy design, institutional weakness, and ideological drift. Aman examines ideas from Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's *Abundance* on building an 'abundant' society through innovation, institutional reform, and cultural renewal. He connects their arguments to Australia's challenges around housing, technology, and public investment, offering a hopeful but critical lens on the need for bold policy ambition.

We also have a profile of WA-based board member Priya Brown, who shares her journey into unionism and Labor politics. Influenced by her family, university life, and a rebellious streak, Priya reflects on the importance of collective action and lessons for emerging activists.

Finally, we republish Michael Easson's heartfelt tribute to David Cragg, a stalwart of Australia's and Victoria's labour movement who passed away in March. Craggy is remembered as a dedicated unionist, policy expert, and

advocate for social justice. His approach was grounded in pragmatism, favouring gradual, tangible improvements over utopian ideals. David Cragg was a JCRC Board member between 2017-2023 and Advisory Council member from 2024 until his passing. Most importantly he was a comrade, and a mate, and we miss him dearly.

We've had a characteristically active start to 2025, from our successful 2025 Gala Dinner with Richard Marles, concluding Common Good 'Housing for All' event with NSW Premier Chris Minns, roaring success of our Curtin's Cast podcast hosted by myself and Kos Samaras, and high-profile media work. Fundamental to this activity are our supporters. Your backing ensures that we can honour the legacy of John Curtin—not just as a figure of history, but as a model for contemporary leadership, and powers our research, writing and advocacy. By becoming a supporter, you gain priority access to our publications, including Tocsin, and our weekly digest, Curtin's Corner, which offers curated insights into politics, culture, and ideas. In the words of our thinktank's inspiration, Labor's greatest prime minister: "It is only through the ideas and actions of working people that a better and more decent way of life can be given to all."

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In Unity,

Nick Dyrenfurth,

Editor of The Tocsin

Executive Director, John Curtin Research Centre

A game with no agreed rules: The 2025 Australian federal election

Frank Bongiorno

What happened?

The Australian Labor Party's victory in the federal election on 3 May 2025 was anticipated, given the consistent trend in opinion polling throughout the campaign. But the scale of the win—93 or possibly 94 seats in a 150-member House of Representatives—was beyond any prediction. If the re-elected Albanese Labor government lands on 94, its tally would equal that achieved by the Coalition under John Howard in 1996 in a slightly smaller House of 148.

Labor achieved its highest-ever seat total and its largest proportion of seats in the House of Representatives since 1943, when, under John Curtin's wartime leadership, it secured about two-thirds of the seats. This time, the proportion is approximately 63%. Labor's two-party preferred (2PP) share of 54.8% to the Coalition's 45.2% ranks among the largest in Australian federal political history, exceeded since 1949 only by the Coalition in 1966 (56.9%) and 1975 (55.7%). Likely only Curtin did better in 1943, although 2PP figures are less reliable for that era due to the absence of full preference distributions.

The 2025 federal election was only the third time that a Labor prime minister won sequential elections, the previous examples being Gough Whitlam in 1974 and Bob Hawke in 1984 (followed by further victories in 1987 and 1990). Albanese also became the first prime minister from either party to be re-elected since John Howard in 2004.

The Shifting Fortunes of Independents and Greens

Community independents ran major party rivals close in several seats – including the Labor-held divisions Bean in the Australian Capital Territory and Fremantle in Western Australia – suggesting that they are far from being one-trick ponies. But in terms of numbers in the House, the teals have lost ground. North Sydney went in a redistribution ahead of the election, the Liberals narrowly claimed Goldstein, and the independent, Alex Dyson, failed to break though in the Victorian Western District seat of Wannon, where Liberal Dan Tehan held on. At the time of writing, the independent candidate in the Sydney seat of Bradfield, Nicolette Boele, is still a chance.

For the Greens, it was a disappointing election. They suffered a major blow when their leader, Adam Bandt, lost Melbourne to Labor's Sarah Witty. Additionally, they lost two of the three House seats they had gained in Brisbane during the 2022 election. Nonetheless, they maintain their strength in the Senate, and a Labor government, even with a majority as large as that achieved at the 2025 election and with improved Senate representation as well, will need to negotiate patiently with the Greens on any legislation opposed by the Coalition.

The Coalition's Collapse

Under Peter Dutton's leadership, the Liberal-National Coalition suffered its poorest result—securing only 40 seats out of 150 in the House—since the Liberal Party of Australia's formation in 1944. Dutton's suburban strategy – his idea of appealing to 'forgotten Australians' announced at his very first press conference as leader in May 2022 – lies in tatters. Nor has the Coalition enjoyed much success in territory claimed by community independents in 2022 or earlier, although Goldstein in Melbourne will likely return to the Liberal column with Tim Wilson's narrow victory over Zoe Daniel.

The Liberals are also doing poorly in many regional centres. Nine Media's Shane Wright has noticed that even in the new Liberal leader Sussan Ley's own seat of Farrer, an

independent candidate, Michelle Milthorpe, defeated her in Albury in all but one small booth on the 2PP vote, reversing the 2022 result with a swing of 12.8% in that city. The swings to Labor in Whyalla, South Australia (10%), and Devonport, Tasmania (15%), were also huge.

The extent of the Liberals' suburban challenges was underscored by Peter Dutton's loss of his own marginal seat of Dickson. While two prime ministers have previously lost their seats at a general election, and the occasional party leader has fallen (such as the Country Party's Earle Page and National Party's Charles Blunt), this was the first time a Leader of the Opposition had suffered this fate, when Ali France defeated Peter Dutton in Dickson on her third attempt. The Liberals now hold no seats in Adelaide, just one on Perth's suburban fringe, and no House seats at all in Tasmania. Apart from Goldstein, and the seats of Casey, Flinders and La Trobe on Melbourne's outer suburban fringes, they are without representation in what is now Australia's largest city. There were also Liberal losses, and Labor gains (from both the Liberals and Greens), in Brisbane, while Labor won the Far North Queensland seat of Leichhardt with the retirement of the long-standing Liberal member. Labor continues to perform well in Sydney, adding two further seats from the 2022 election, and easily holding marginal (but traditionally Liberal) Bennelong. Formerly held by John Howard and nominally Liberal after a redistribution, it is now numerically a safe Labor seat.

The Nationals held their ground in terms of House seats, won small swings in some places, and even managed to run Labor candidate Lisa Chesters close in the Victorian seat of Bendigo. But Andrew Gee, who defected from the Nationals over its opposition to the Indigenous Voice, held his seat (Calare, New South Wales) as an independent. The Northern Territory senator for the Country Liberal Party, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who sat in the Nationals party room in Canberra in the last Parliament, defected to the Liberals after the election in an ill-fated bid for the party's deputy leadership.

Why did it happen?

The word 'historic' is a journalistic cliché but has understandably been commonly applied to the 2025 federal election. The period immediately after an election is one in which members of the political class – politicians, officials, pollsters, think tankers, journalists, lobbyists, activists and advocates – all jostle to impose their narratives on the available facts to explain the result. All such explanations need to be treated with caution. We will have research to give us a clearer picture before the end of the year, with the publication of the latest Australian Election Study (AES) which is led by Professor Ian McAllister, based at the Australian National University, and conducted after each election (and allowing that it has its critics.) In the meantime, we are reliant on what pollsters found ahead of the election, and what can be gleaned from examining the results themselves. Analysis of who voted for whom and why is often more intuitive than scientific, and the ecological fallacy – in which false inferences about individual voting behaviour are drawn from aggregate data about a particular population – is sometimes perpetrated in the interests of providing convenient explanation. For instance, critics of the ecological fallacy argue that it is not true that just because there are many more young people than old people in an electorate, and many more people vote Labor than Liberal in that electorate, then young people must be more inclined to vote Labor. Other voting data is needed to sustain this case.

So, here are a few things we do know, and a few we might justly suspect. I will try to set out these facts, suspicions and hypotheses in a broader historical context where possible.

The Economy Didn't Sink Labor

First, it is unlikely that enough voters were persuaded that the state of the economy, and its future prospects under a Coalition, warranted a change of government. The historical context here is that the Coalition has traditionally been rated the better economic manager by Australian voters, but the AES shows that its advantage has narrowed over the years.

It is not that Australia's economy is booming. An annual growth rate of not much more than 1% and poor productivity are hardly matters for boasting or celebration. Australia, moreover, experienced a cost-of-living crisis and drop in living standards over the last three years – fuelled by soaring energy costs and rising interest rates – which some commentators during much of 2024 felt could be fatal to Albanese and Labor. That they were not fatal was probably the result of two factors: firstly, improvements that saw the rate of inflation return to the usual Reserve Bank target of between two and three per cent and the first interest rate cut for years just before the campaign began; and, secondly, a strong possibility that many voters saw the Coalition, with three terms in government (2013-2022), as carrying a good deal of the burden of responsibility for the country's economic problems. In this, of course, they would be right. The Coalition, while in office, boasted of stagnant wages as a deliberate design feature of its approach to industrial relations and economic management. When inflation hit hard (partly as a result of the combination of the pandemic legacy and the Russo-Ukraine war) just as the Coalition was leaving office, living standards plunged. It was always cheeky of Dutton to lay the blame on Labor for what happened next, and it is conceivable many voters saw through it and disbelieved that their lives would be better under a Dutton government. The last Newspoll before the election had 57 per cent of respondents saying they would be better off over the next three years under an Albanese government, compared with to 43 per cent for Dutton – a gap even wider among women and young voters.

The Trump Effect

Then there was the Trump effect. Developments in the US do not usually impinge very directly on an Australian election campaign: one exception, often identified, is the assassination of John F. Kennedy about a week before the 1963 poll, which saw the Menzies government returned with a greatly increased majority. It is usually treated as

helping the incumbent. In Australian elections since 2007, incumbency has often seemed disadvantageous, with voters being inclined to blame the federal government for a range of ills, whether within its control or otherwise.

The tables appear to have turned, and many are crediting – or blaming – the Trump effect. In late April 2025, a Canadian Liberal government that had seemed headed for certain political death under Justin Trudeau a few months before recovered under new prime minister Mark Carney to gain re-election. The Trump effect – arising from a withdrawal by the United States from its international commitments, a tariff war on friend and foe alike, and a general sense of extremism, authoritarianism and chaos – seemed to help Albanese. The flirtations of Dutton and other Coalition politicians with MAGA-style populism increased the likelihood of such a dynamic. Polling by Q+A/YouGov reported in late March indicated that between June 2024 and April 2025, the proportion of respondents agreeing that Australia could not rely on the United States for security had grown from 39% to 66%. Albanese was rated better able to handle the relationship with the United States (by 55% to 45%). In 2025 Albanese was highly successful in presenting his government as a reliable, seaworthy vessel in a stormy ocean.

Third, the quest for government – for executive power – remains a contest between two teams in which the two main leaders wear the colours of each. Opinion polling showed Albanese was preferred prime minister (51% to 35% in the final Newspoll before the election) and that he had a far better approval rating than Dutton. Sixty per cent of voters said they disapproved of how Dutton was doing his job in the election-eve Newspoll. These were disastrous numbers, reflecting major miscalculations in electoral strategy and policy formulation during the preceding three years, and an error-riddled Coalition campaign that surprised most commentators with its lack of coherence or competence.

Dutton Misread Voters

Dutton and his allies appear to have assumed that the 60% of voters who rejected the Indigenous Voice to Parliament and the Executive on 14 October 2023 could be converted into a Coalition majority at a general election. This assumption was odd: a glance at the past would have shown that governments can suffer defeat at a referendum, narrowly, as in Menzies at the Communist Party referendum in 1951, or humiliatingly, as in the Hawke Government's proposals in 1988, and go on to govern for years afterwards.

The Coalition failed to provide either policies or image capable of rallying the voters who needed to be won over after the disaster of 2022. That included women, diverse communities, the young and middle-aged, renters and tertiary-educated professionals. Dutton seems to have had in view a fabled conservative, patriotic, anti-woke, materially-minded (and perhaps also, implicitly, Anglo-Celtic and male) voter in the suburbs and regions who would flock to the Coalition in sufficient numbers to push it into contention for minority government. It is hard to know where he thought all the voters were going to come from. Yet in the end, with its turn to culture war issues like the Indigenous Welcome to Country, Dutton's campaign looked to be increasingly addressed to just this kind of mythical voter – presumably already in the Coalition tent to the extent they were real flesh and blood rather than figments of the imagination – instead of devoting himself to converting those who needed to be converted. Still, the poverty of the Coalition campaign itself might have been more a symptomof Liberal failure than its cause, helping to account for the large scale of defeat rather than for defeat itself.

By way of contrast, Labor's campaign was focussed, disciplined and nearly flawless in terms of its execution – a testament to Albanese's campaigning skills, but also to national secretary and campaign director, Paul Erickson, and the wider Labor Party. Labor did not, through its offerings, propose ambitious structural reform, but a well-designed set of spending commitments – many of them already on the table before the election was called – and a crisp set of accompanying messages that targeted key groups of voters in a credible and low-key way. Albanese himself seemed to gain confidence and momentum as the campaign proceeded. But he might have had to do little more than avoid major error: the Liberals' goose was probably cooked – if not quite as thoroughly as it would be at the end of the campaign – by the time the election was called in late March.

Conclusion

Australia was once a country in which the great majority of voters were committed to a particular party and tended to stick to it for much of their lives, election after election. They would often inherit such allegiances from parents: political attachments stretched across generations, reflecting deep belonging to class, religion and community. Levels of partisanship, in this sense, were high by international standards, partly a result of the system of compulsory voting. The AES has shown that this is no longer the case. The lifelong party voter is in decline: 12% reported lifetime Labor voting in 2022, and 16% for the Coalition, compared with 32% and 36% respectively in 1967. People are more willing to change between elections; they are more willing to support candidates who do not represent a major party. Younger voters are especially mobile. All of this is reflected in the fragmentation of allegiance, a declining major party primary vote, and rising support for independents and minor parties.

Many of us in recent years have said that, as a result of these trends, the major parties have found it impossible to corral voters in the way they did in the heyday of the major party system between 1910 and 1990. That is still true, in the wake of the 2025 campaign. However, a qualification also seems to be called for. If the circumstances are right, as they were in 2025 for the reasons set out above, that same fluidity can also work in favour of one of the major parties, even if only temporarily. At least for a time, primary votes and preferences can come flooding back – as they have in 2025. But, by the same logic, this fluidity means that such voters might also be hard to keep onside. What can be

gained at one election, can be lost at the next.

The Albanese government, much like the electorate it serves, is navigating a political landscape without a clear manual or agreed-upon set of rules. The politicians of our time must, for good or ill, write both on the hop. The past is a weak guide to the present. But this election outcome should be claimed as a big win for the centre left internationally, in an era when it is right-wing populists who have until now shown the most aptitude for making it up as they go along.

Frank Bongiorno is Professor of History at the Australian National University and Distinguished Fellow of the Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University. He is, with Nick Dyrenfurth, co-author of A Little History of the Australian Labor Party and other books and articles on Australian history and politics.

The Coalition's Urban Collapse: A Party Adrift from a Changing Australia

Kos Samaras

As the dust settles on the 2025 federal election, the numbers lay bare a brutal truth for the Coalition: its grip on modern Australia is slipping and may already be beyond recovery.

Across every major capital city, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, and Hobart the Coalition now holds only a handful of federal seats. In demographic terms, they're almost entirely absent from the Australia that is emerging. The Liberal and National parties now hold none of the country's most diverse electorates, and just four of the top 30 seats with the highest proportion of Gen Z and Millennial voters with a bachelor's degree or higher. When it comes to the top 30 electorates with the largest Gen Z populations, they hold only three.

These aren't statistical quirks. They are the very electorates that will shape and decide every federal election for the next decade. And right now, the Coalition barely registers in them.

Much of this shift is being driven by rising cultural diversity, particularly the growing Indian and Chinese diasporas who are transforming once-safe Liberal seats like Deakin, Menzies, Chisholm, Bennelong, and Reid into contested Labor territory. These are communities that are ambitious, outward-looking, and deeply invested in Australia's future. Yet the Coalition's ideological centre of gravity no longer resonates with them or even recognises them. You only have to look at some of the Coalition's election TV advertisements to appreciate this blind spot. In one ad, they used a white, nuclear family to illustrate a "typical" Australian household struggling under Labor. In a country where nearly one in two Australians were either born overseas or have a parent who was, this kind of imagery isn't just outdated, it's alienating. It reveals a party still speaking to a version of Australia that no longer exists, while ignoring the realities, identities, and aspirations of the people who will determine its electoral future.

The generational divide is even more pronounced. Young Australians, especially Generation Z, haven't turned away from the Coalition; they were never there in the first place. The party has failed to build any meaningful political relationship with this cohort, which now represents the largest and fastest-growing voting bloc. Across all our federal election research, the Coalition struggled to reach even 20 percent support among this demographic.

But it's not just young voters. The Coalition's support among women has also collapsed, falling below the already-low levels seen under Scott Morrison, who left office with a well-earned reputation for having a credibility crisis with female voters. This erosion of trust is now structural, not cyclical. It cuts across urban Australia, from Perth to Melbourne to Brisbane.

Labor entered the final weeks of the campaign with a 10-point two-party preferred lead among women, before a single ballot was even cast. That margin wasn't the product of a slick campaign or media moment. It reflected a decade-long failure by the Coalition to engage with a modern electorate. The work from home policy was merely just another proof point.

Today's Australian women, diverse, educated, working, raising families, and grappling with the pressures of a cost-of-living crisis, no longer see themselves in the values, priorities, or tone of the Liberal Party. This is no longer just a messaging or policy problem. It's a cultural one and hence, the work from home policy merely reinforced in the eyes of many Australian women, that the Liberal Party thinks they should be in the office serving tea to the boss or back at home in the kitchen.

Hence, it no longer represents the fastest-growing communities in the country. It remains trapped in a shrinking demographic bubble, shaped by nostalgia, social

conservatism, and economic orthodoxy that speaks more to the Australia of 1995 than 2025.

This isn't just a gender gap. It's not just a youth gap. It's a values gap and a fundamental mismatch with the Australia that now exists.

The country that elected Tony Abbott in 2013 is gone. It has been replaced by a volatile, culturally diverse, values-driven, and economically anxious electorate, one that expects serious answers on housing, inclusion, climate, and fairness.

If this trajectory continues, the Coalition risks more than another lost election. It risks irrelevance. Unless it redefines who it is, who it speaks for, and what kind of Australia it wants to shape, it will remain locked out of the suburbs, cities, and communities where the country's future is being written.

Robert Menzies transformed the Liberal Party to reflect the realities of a rapidly changing post-war Australia. That reinvention laid the foundation for decades of political relevance. Today, the party faces a similar moment of reckoning. To avoid drifting into long-term irrelevance, the Liberal Party must undergo its own modern reformation, one that reconnects it with the values, diversity, and aspirations of the Australia that exists now, not the one it still imagines.

Kos Samaras is a Director of one of Australia's leading research and polling companies. He specialises in compiling and interpreting research, statistical data and polling to provide a unique insight into the cause and effects of social and political issues impacting communities across Australia. From 2005-2019, he served as Victorian Labor's deputy campaign director, working on 4 state and federal elections and numerous by-elections.

With Australia's Cities Painted Red, It's Time for the Regions

Jonte Verwey

In the fallout from the federal election, many commentators focussed their collective attention on the magnitude of Labor's landslide victories in the inner cities and suburbs of Australia's metropolitan areas. As vanquished Liberal Keith Wolahan rightly pointed out, this focus is justified because this is where most Australians live, and his party's almost total expulsion from urban Australia is a crisis for the conservatives. Labor has truly established itself as the natural choice of urban and suburban voters.

While the strength of the Labor vote in the nation's cities will shape the character of the next three years of Labor government, it is important to recognise that the ALP remains significantly underrepresented in regional Australia. There are 63 electorates classified by the Australian Electoral Commission as rural or provincial. For the purposes of this article, we can collectively refer to them as 'regional' seats. As Labor holds only 24 of these regional seats, they warrant further attention from Labor if it seeks to both reclaim its roots, as well as to expand its appeal.

If Labor wants to further expand the electoral map in the next federal election, it is important to understand how it can succeed in regional Australia, and what it needs to do to stem losses in the regional areas it already holds.

Labor did well to expand its representation in regional Australia at this election. The gains of the two northern Tasmanian seats of Bass and Braddon, along with the sprawling Far North Queensland electorate of Leichhardt are good cases to examine in the first instance. In marginal regional seats the party already held, Labor substantially increased its vote, including in the massive NT electorate of Lingiari and regional NSW seats such as Gilmore and Hunter which are also important to examine. Labor – or any political movement for that matter – cannot treat regional Australia as a monolith. Voters in these electorates can often feel detached from the national conversation. When voters in regional Australia enter polling booths, they tend to frame their choice in terms of the local area and the local candidates, rather than any large national narrative (even if it does have local implications). Old party allegiances, as with everywhere else in Australia, are declining. However, there are several factors that help decide local votes in regional Australia.

Incumbency is Key

A popular incumbent is often hard to dislodge, even if it is in a marginal electorate. The best example of this is Leichhardt in Queensland. Comprising the majority of the Cairns metropolitan area, it also covers the vast majority of the Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait. The large rural component of the electorate makes it very hard to accurately poll. Cairns has a long history as a Labor stronghold in state politics, however the party has only ever won Leichhardt in the last thirty years when the Liberals did not run Warren Entsch (2007 and 2025). Entsch, as local MP, had broad appeal, was a moderate and has a uniquely Far North Queensland quirky character. He worked the electorate hard, and voters of all backgrounds rewarded him consistently with their vote. The loss of his name from the ballot in 2025 led to some wild double-digit swings against the LNP, especially in Indigenous communities where Entsch was popular. This included a swing of almost 50% to Labor in the remote Kowanyama booth. While there was a stark contrast between Labor's and the LNP's policy offering for First Nations peoples (who make up a significant proportion of the Leichhardt voter roll), the magnitude of this swing can be attributed to the loss of a popular incumbent. As such, when Labor gets an indication that a popular Liberal or National incumbent in a regional seat is going to retire (especially in a seat that Labor has been able to win in the past), preparations should be made for early quality candidate selection and a well-resourced campaign, as was seen in Leichhardt. Matt Smith, a former basketballer for the

Cairns Taipans and Labor's new MP for Leichhardt, has the same sort of work ethic and appeal across communities that will put him in good stead for a long stint representing the Far North. Similarly, in Braddon, Labor preselected a highly-credentialled candidate in Senator Anne Urquhart to make the switch to the lower house, with Gavin Pearce retiring in that seat. Combined with Anne's experience and work ethic, the looming unpopularity of the Rockliff Government, and the absence of a popular incumbent in the seat contributed to a fifteen per cent swing in Labor's favour in the Tasmanian Northwest – the largest swing to Labor in the nation.

Early and Quality Candidate Selection

The case studies for early and quality candidate selections are Braddon and Lyons in Tasmania. Labor selected two prominent, experienced and highly-qualified women to represent the party in two must-win seats – one held and one targeted. While not necessarily named as Labor candidates for this federal election early, Anne Urquhart and Rebecca White had long associations with the seats they contested (Anne as a Senator based in North West Tasmania, and Rebecca as a former State Labor leader and State Member for Lyons). Likewise, Labor wisely preselected Marion Scrymgour, a former Labor Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, to succeed long-term MP Warren Snowdon in 2022 in Lingiari. Marion's profile and work ethic, alongside the campaign double act she ran with Senator Malarndirri McCarthy across the NT, paid dividends for her with a mighty seven per cent swing in her favour, in the face of a determined CLP campaign which ran on the 'coat-tails' of popular CLP figures in Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro.

Identifying the best candidates in regional Australia is a slow burn process. This emerging talent might not necessarily run in the next election. A future candidate in a winnable regional seat might be someone who wants to gain experience and exposure by running for the local council or being a State candidate. The Liberal and National Parties have previously had success doing this. It's time that Labor's various state branches invest in promising talent and encouraging them to run in local and state races to build profile, experience and campaign confidence. Labor did this well in places like Townsville in Queensland, where Labor-aligned local councillors have gone on to win the three state seats at various times and historically have also won (or nearly won) the electorate of Herbert. A more recent example is the promotion of former Bega Valley Mayor Kristy McBain to run for Eden-Monaro, whose local experience and deep roots in the community have put her in good stead to win that marginal regional seat for three elections.

The Importance of a National Message Combined with a Hyper-Local Campaign

The need to localise broad national campaign themes to a local level is a no-brainer and should be done in all electorates in the country. However, as mentioned earlier, regional voters often feel disconnected from the national discourse. The need to focus in on local issues is thus an essential element to engage voters with Labor candidates outside the capital cities. As a regional Queenslander, it is my default position to point out local Labor successes. Too often these are overlooked by national media and commentariat. However, the Leichhardt campaign by Matt Smith is a case in point in making national themes relevant in local races. As part of Labor's campaign to bolster Medicare, Labor could point to successes in delivering an Urgent Care Clinic in Cairns' southern suburbs in its first term, promising a new one in the north in the second, and linking that up with the national message of Dutton being a risk to Medicare's future. Being responsive to localised issues that don't fit within a national campaign message can also be important, provided it is not a distraction. In Leichhardt, Labor successfully deployed rugby league icon Johnathan Thurston to support Labor's announcement for a women's high performance training centre to support the relocation of the NRLW Cowboys from Townsville to Cairns. In Hunter, Labor MP Dan Repacholi effectively responded to Peter Dutton claiming that towns in his electorate were "dying" with a series of effective social media posts, and in a community with high rates of mental health concerns, Dan made a point of focussing on men's health. This is especially important in mining communities such as the Hunter.

Anthony Albanese and Labor should be proud of their result in this election. Paul Erickson, the national secretariat, and state party branches should be congratulated on a flawless campaign. With such a commanding majority, it's time for Labor – a party born in the strike camps of Barcaldine in Outback Queensland and amongst the shearers of central Victoria – to chart a course that can recapture the minds (and votes!) of the communities from whence the movement came. We need to bolster incumbent Labor MPs in the regions, and swoop when Coalition incumbents retire. We need to identify talent early and support them on a pathway to the Federal Parliament, acknowledging that it takes a few terms. We need to have our finger on the pulse of regional communities; campaigning on local issues and making the national campaign germane to voters in the regions. Labor should not just be content with the sweeping majority we have in Australia's cities. This new mandate must give Labor the impetus to develop the policies and campaign infrastructure needed to win back regional Australia. Labor was born in regional Australia. It's time we take the Labor brand back home and reclaim our roots, bolstering our mandate for years to come.

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The Western Australian state election

John Phillimore

The Western Australian state election held in March this year broke a longstanding pattern. Since 1974, Labor and the Coalition have alternated in government at the state level for roughly equal periods. From 1993 onwards, they have unfailingly traded power after two four-year terms. Theoretically, with Labor having been in office since 2017, it was the Liberal Party's 'turn' to win in 2025. Yet no one realistically believed that would happen, especially after the unprecedented result of the 2021 "Covid election," in which Labor, under Premier Mark McGowan, won 53 out of 59 seats in the Legislative Assembly. The Liberal Party was reduced to just two seats, with the Nationals winning four and becoming the official opposition. While political reversals like Queensland in 2015 can occur, polling throughout late 2024 consistently showed Labor leading 55–45 on a two-party preferred (2PP) basis.

As a result, the 2025 election lead-up became an exercise in managing expectations. Given Labor had won 60% of the primary vote and 70% of the 2PP in 2021, the only direction was down. But how far? And could the Liberals and Nationals recover enough ground to be competitive in 2029? A commonly cited benchmark for the Liberal and National parties was to at least match their combined (poor) 2017 performance, when they won 18 seats. For new Labor Premier Roger Cook, who assumed office in June 2023, the key goal was to emerge from McGowan's shadow and secure a mandate in his own right.

So what happened? In some ways, WA's traditional electoral rhythm reasserted itself, with Labor suffering an 18.5% swing against it on primary votes, falling to 41.4%. However, this resulted in only an 11.9% drop on a 2PP basis, as many voters shifted to minor parties rather than to the Coalition. It was not nearly enough to counteract the combined 27% swing to Labor across the 2017 and 2021 elections. Labor emerged from the 2025 election with 46 out of 59 seats—surpassing its 2017 tally. The Liberals narrowly regained official opposition status with seven seats, while the Nationals won six. Labor's 2PP stood at 57.1%, which was 1.6 points higher than in 2017, allowing it to expand its seat count by five.

A major reason for Labor's success was its retention of many seats that were once Liberal strongholds. Of the 18 seats Labor picked up in 2017, only five saw a lower 2PP vote in 2025, and Labor lost just two of them. Larger swings occurred in the safest Labor seats, though these remained secure. The Liberals regained three traditional seats in the affluent suburbs north of the Swan River, but with modest swings. Meanwhile, Labor held onto similar areas south of the river, a positive sign for its chances in the federal seat of Tangney, which it first captured in 2022.

Labor's comfortable victory in March can be traced to several key factors. First was leadership. The 2021 election devastated the Liberal Party's parliamentary ranks. Recent WA premiers — Gallop, Carpenter, Barnett, McGowan, and now Cook — all served extended political apprenticeships in Opposition and in government before assuming office. The current Liberal Party has no such figure. Libby Mettam, who became leader in 2023, was largely unknown and not even officially the Opposition Leader due to the Nationals' greater seat count after 2021.

Leadership and party instability compounded the Liberals' issues. Mettam had to fend off an attempted coup in November, when some within the party wanted Basil Zempilas—the Lord Mayor of Perth and a prominent media personality—to take over from outside parliament, similar to Queensland's Campbell Newman in 2011. Additionally, there was friction between the Coalition parties. The Liberals even ran a candidate against Nationals leader Shane Love in his own seat, poaching one of the Nationals' MPs to do so. Labor, by contrast, remained unified and scandal-free during both terms. Despite a large backbench, internal discipline was strong. With re-election likely, the party refreshed its parliamentary ranks amicably, as over a fifth of its Legislative Assembly members retired before the election.

Another pillar of Labor's victory was the state's robust economy. WA's finances are the strongest in the country, buoyed by iron ore royalties and a 2018 GST deal that ensures the state retains 75% of the GST revenue it generates. Labor ran on this economic record, pairing it with cost-of-living relief measures and policies promoting economic diversification. A pledge to subsidise household solar batteries resonated with voters.

Labor in WA presents itself as a centrist, pragmatic force. Cook emphasised economic development in a state that traditionally values enterprise. His government remained pro-gas, 'streamlined' environmental approvals, reduced local government input on planning, and scaled back Aboriginal cultural heritage reforms. Critics argue the government is too aligned with the mining sector. However, in WA, this is hard to avoid. Resources are central to the state's economy and fiscal stability, with mining royalties accounting for about a quarter of total revenue. The sector is also a significant employer, second only to health. The widespread adoption of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) employment since the 1980s means mining workers now live throughout WA, including in Perth suburbs. Every MP represents constituents whose incomes depend directly or indirectly on the resources sector. This helps explains Labor's resistance to federal intrusions on the industry.

Still, in other areas, Labor has governed in a more traditionally progressive manner. Despite its support for gas, it has committed to phasing out coal by 2030 and is investing large amounts in renewable energy and critical minerals as part of its diversification strategy. It has made record investments in public transport through its Metronet initiative, reformed electoral donations and financing, toughened gun laws, banned native forest logging, and launched policies supporting domestic violence victims and crime survivors.

The election campaign itself was relatively lacklustre, given the almost universal expectation of a comfortable Labor victory. Labor campaigned on its record and contrasted its experience and stability with the lack of preparedness of the Liberal Party and the divisions between the Liberals and the Nationals. It promised increased investment in housing, hospitals, and energy, as well as expansion of the city ferry network. A surprise promise to build a $217 million motorsport precinct on bushland in Burswood Park (near the city) has the potential to be a flashpoint in the next few years.

After eight years in government, Labor was not without vulnerabilities. During the campaign, Mettam criticised Labor's handling of health, housing, and policing. Cook's past attacks on the Barnett government over ambulance ramping were thrown back at him, as the issue has worsened under his leadership. Housing affordability remains a concern, with rising prices and rents. Police recruitment targets have also been missed.

Much of this stems from Labor's tight fiscal management in its first term. McGowan prioritised debt reduction and limited spending on health, housing, and public sector wages. Cook took a different approach, loosening spending constraints and delivering more generous pay deals, energy rebates, and support for school families — moves made possible by the state's strong budget position.

Labor's 2021 Legislative Council majority – its first ever – allowed it to enact reforms, removing regional vote weighting and group ticket voting. The upper house is now a single statewide electorate of 37 members elected through proportional representation. This change lowers the vote threshold for winning a seat to 2.63%, aiding minor (but not micro) parties while eliminating backroom preference deals.

In the 2025 Council, Labor won 16 seats, followed by the Liberals (10), Greens (4), Nationals (2), and One Nation (2). Legalise Cannabis, the Australian Christians, and Animal Justice each won one seat. Labor has ample options to pass legislation by working with crossbenchers or even, on occasions, with the Liberal or National parties.

Labor has now secured its three largest state victories in consecutive elections and looks in the box seat to win a fourth term in 2029. The Liberals, by contrast, remain in poor shape, weighed down by internal factional infighting. Their federal performance in WA – already dismal at the 2022 election – has further declined. In the May federal election, Labor gained another seat—Moore—and won the new seat of Bullwinkel. Meanwhile, independent Kate Chaney retained Curtin against a strong Liberal push in one of the most expensive electorate-level campaigns in Australian history.

This leaves the Liberals with just four of WA's 16 federal seats, a steep drop from the 11 they held in 2019, while Labor now holds 11 seats, with a 2PP of 55.6 per cent.

The political transformation of Western Australia over the past decade is profound. The 2021 'black swan' election may have permanently altered the state's reputation as a federal Liberal stronghold and a state-level political metronome. While there are no guarantees in politics, WA increasingly resembles South Australia — a state leaning solidly toward Labor.

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Global Storm, Local Stakes: Foreign Policy and the Federal Election

Dominic Meagher

ntroduction: Who do we trust?

In a year defined by global upheaval and strategic turbulence, Australians went to the polls hoping for—if not expecting—a domestic-focussed election. The cost of living, housing affordability, and economic pressure were front and centre. But international affairs refused to stay in the background. Despite the campaign's national focus, the 2025 federal election unfolded in the long shadow of international developments that dominated headlines and shaped public sentiment: China's naval circumnavigation of the Australian continent, Putin's war in Ukraine and his unsettling proposal for a Russian airbase in Indonesia, the devastating toll of Hamas' war against Israel—which continues to inflict suffering on innocent civilians—and the disruptive second coming of US President Donald Trump.

These issues were ever-present in the public conversation, but only one party exercised the discipline not to make them the campaign's centrepiece. Labor acknowledged the global context while keeping its focus firmly on the priorities of Australians. In stark contrast, Peter Dutton's Liberals repeatedly tried to turn the election into a referendum on imported culture war issues, mimicking US political tactics with little relevance to Australian life. His campaign opened with a promise to slash 40,000 public service roles and end work-from-home arrangements—policies no one had asked for, seemingly borrowed straight from Elon Musk's DOGE playbook. The backlash was immediate, particularly among women and families who depend on workplace flexibility. Just as abruptly, Dutton retreated from the proposals, leaving the impression of a campaign driven by ideology rather than practicality.

This election didn't just test policies; it tested instincts. It asked voters: who could be trusted to guide Australia through the next geopolitical shock, the next Trump tariff, the next regional confrontation? Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Labor answered that question with composure, clarity, and a plan rooted in Australian values. The party offered a model of leadership that recognised global risks but kept its eyes on the needs of Australians—services, stability, and opportunity. Albanese's strength was not performative; it was practical. As he himself put it on election night: "Australians have chosen to face global challenges the Australian way—looking after each other, while building for the future."

The result was emphatic. The Coalition's misreading of the moment—its embrace of Trumpian rhetoric, its neglect of Australian priorities—cost it dearly. Candidates and parties that tried to import foreign agendas or elevate ideological battles disconnected from Australian life were decisively rejected, including the Greens to Labor's left. In multicultural electorates, where global events are often felt at the family or community level, voters backed leaders who could stay focused on building a better life at home. Australians were paying attention to the world—but they wanted a government focused on their needs at home.

IDirect Signals – China's Naval Encirclement and Russia's Airbase Proposal

In an election dominated by domestic pressures, two foreign powers made their presence felt in ways unmistakably aimed at Australia. These weren't distant geopolitical crises but strategic signals – one from Beijing, the other from Moscow – testing Australia's preparedness, sovereignty, and foreign policy judgment. In late February and early March 2025, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) task group conducted an unprecedented circumnavigation of Australia. Comprising the frigate Hengyang, the cruiser Zunyi, and the replenishment ship Weishanhu, Task Group 107 sailed around the continent and conducted live-fire exercises that interfered with civilian commercial aircraft. Though the operation adhered to international law, its timing and configuration left little doubt about its intent: to signal that China could project power directly into Australia's maritime approaches.

Labor's response was calm and controlled. Defence

Minister Richard Marles confirmed that the vessels had been subjected to "the most extensive surveillance a cruise of this type has ever been subjected to," including continuous shadowing by two Australian frigates and regular overflights by P-8 maritime aircraft. Rather than inflating the threat, the government framed the event within a broader message: Australia is prepared, professional, and clear-eyed about its strategic environment. Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong emphasised the importance of deterrence, regional diplomacy, and capability investment—without resorting to inflammatory rhetoric.

Peter Dutton, by contrast, defaulted to conflict and overreach. Perhaps he was sensitive to his role in the Morrison government's handling of the Pacific – and his lack of action over the sale of Darwin Port – a region it ignored to such an extent that the government was unaware until after the fact that the CCP had established a defence partnership with the Solomon Islands. Penny Wong—then in opposition—called it "the worst Australian foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War II." Labor made the case that the Coalition had taken the region for granted, ignored climate diplomacy, and allowed strategic trust to wither. They promised to rebuild those relationships—and did. The Solomon Islands episode was a turning point, not just for foreign policy, but for who Australians trusted to handle it.

Now, with Chinese warships circling the continent, Dutton leaned heavily into criticism of the government's handling of the PLAN's naval encirclement. He accused the government of being too slow to respond to the live-fire drills, focusing in particular on the 40-minute delay before the Australian Defence Force was formally alerted. He called the Prime Minister's handling "the weakest, most limp-wristed response you could see from a leader"—a remark he later walked back. But precisely what he thought he would've done differently, Dutton couldn't say.

That same pattern of knee-jerk response played out again weeks later, when Janes reported that Russia had requested permission to base long-range aircraft at an Indonesian air base in Papua province—just 1,300 kilometres from Darwin. Dutton seized on the story, calling it a "catastrophic failure" of Labor's diplomacy and claiming that Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto had confirmed the proposal. His claims unravelled almost immediately. Indonesia's Defence Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin personally assured Defence Minister Richard Marles that his country was absolutely not—and would not—entertain such an idea. Marles publicly welcomed the swift and unequivocal clarification, noting that it was "exactly the assurance I would want to have in respect of where Indonesia is at with this."

Rather than embarrass the government, Dutton appeared impulsive and risky. Worse, he invited questions about the Coalition's own defence policy that he was not ready to answer. The only response forthcoming was a promise that policies would be released soon. But when this supposedly signature policy finally arrived, millions of Australians had already voted. They didn't miss much: the policy offered little more than a target for defence spending as a percentage of GDP – no details on capability, no funding plan, no procurement timeline, no concept of what the spending would fund (much less why). The whole event reinforced the broader contrast between the campaigns: an unprepared, reactive, substance-light Coalition, and a stable, deliberate, well-prepared Labor government.

This contrast was thrown into sharper relief during one of the four televised leaders' debates. Dutton admitted he was wrong in his claims about what the Indonesian President had said. It wasn't the first time during the campaign that Dutton had to reverse policy course or disown words. For Labor, the contrast couldn't have been clearer. Since 2022, the Albanese government had prioritised diplomacy in the Pacific and Southeast Asia – signing new treaties, rebuilding climate partnerships, and deepening defence collaboration. When Indonesia needed clarity, it picked up the phone. In contrast, when Dutton gave his major foreign policy speech at the Lowy Institute, he didn't mention Indonesia. When he nominated the country he'd visit first as PM, he pledged to prioritise a US visit over Jakarta.

Together, these two moments – China's encirclement and Russia's airbase gambit – offered Australians a window into leadership under pressure. Dutton tried to turn them into campaign flashpoints. But voters saw something else: a leader who acted before thinking, stirred up problems before checking facts, and delivered a defence policy without doing the groundwork. Labor, by contrast, kept its focus and its cool. It responded with competence, not fear-mongering. It drew strength from relationships, not postures. And when it mattered, it had the standing and credibility to get the reassurance Australia needed.

These weren't just foreign events. They were tests of leadership and judgment. And Australians chose steady hands over swinging fists.

The Trump Factor – Lies, Injustice, and the MAGA Way

By the time Australians headed to the polls in 2025, Donald Trump had been back in the White House for less than four months. That was long enough to upend the global conversation, rattle markets, raise forecasts of an American recession, and force the Australian public – long a steadfast supporter of the US alliance – to seriously reconsider its strategic and economic assumptions. Trump's second term was expected to be disruptive. What shocked observers was how far beyond expectations he went.

It wasn't just Trump's war on trade; it was the message it sent to Australians. In his so-called 'Liberation Day' speech in February, Trump announced sweeping new trade restrictions on every country other than Mexico and Canada (who had already been subjected to months of abuse). He targeted allies, including Australia – and even non-countries where no one lives. Prime Minister Albanese, in the middle of a press conference when the news broke, responded within minutes. He condemned the tariffs as "totally unwarranted" and "not the act of a friend." He said that a "reciprocal

tariff" (as Trump dishonestly called his policy) would be 0%. Standing alongside Foreign Minister Wong and Trade Minister Don Farrell, Albanese made it clear that Australia's biosecurity standards, pharmaceutical protections, and media bargaining rules were non-negotiable: "Not on my watch."

But what made the moment so significant wasn't just the content of Trump's policy – it was the scale of the rupture it signalled. Australia is a trading nation. We import a huge portion of everything we consume, and to afford those imports, we must export. Our wealth, our currency, our standard of living all rely heavily upon open markets. And while Australian exports to the US are modest, Trump's war on China (our largest customer) posed a much deeper threat. Trump's quasi-embargo on China trade risked tipping the global economy into recession, disrupting supply chains, and weakening demand for Australian goods. That is the real danger—not a tariff on beef or wine, but a collapse in the global trade rules.

Yet it isn't even just trade. Trump's return brought with it a full-spectrum assault on global norms. His attacks on Canada, Mexico, and Greenland, ranging from threats to annex Canadian territory to reviving his bizarre obsession with buying Greenland or "getting it one way or another", left Australians wondering whether about our ally's reliability. Trump's admiration for Vladimir Putin, contempt for NATO, and threats to withdraw US support from Ukraine, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific all sent a chilling message: for the first time since World War II, Australia could not count on the US as a stable security partner.

This strategic uncertainty forced a shift in how voters assessed Australia's foreign policy leadership. It wasn't just about whether Labor or the Coalition had the better defence policy. It was about which party understood the moment. Labor had spent three years rebuilding regional relationships – treaties with Tuvalu and Nauru, climate diplomacy in the Pacific, a security-first approach to ASEAN. Albanese told voters Australia had to stand on its own feet, build its own capabilities, and deepen regional ties. On ABC's Q+A, when asked if he trusted Trump, he didn't flinch: "We have an ANZUS agreement and an alliance with the United States—but we need to make sure our defence is up to scratch." It was the voice of sober realism, not panic.

In contrast, the Coalition under Dutton appeared to many voters as dangerously aligned with Trump's style, if not always with his substance. When Trump launched his tariff blitz, Dutton responded vaguely, promising to "negotiate a carve-out" but offering no detail on what that would involve or what Australia might give up in return. There was no plan—just posture. And voters noticed.

But the deeper problem for the Coalition wasn't just its lack of preparation. It was that Trump's radicalism cast a harsh light on the Coalition's own drift toward imported political tactics. Dutton's campaign was saturated with culture war signals: warnings about "woke" policies; panic over diversity and inclusion programs. These issues might have made sense in a Fox News studio, but they felt out of place in Australia. Outside the Liberal Party room and Sky News After Dark, few Australians were interested in fighting America's culture wars.

Trump's obsession with DEI is a fixation of the American right. But Dutton's attempts to echo that language seemed out of step with Australian values, especially in a country that has long embraced multiculturalism as a strength, not a threat. The contrast couldn't have been starker: while Albanese focused on jobs, cost of living, and regional stability, Dutton railed against problems that didn't exist here. It made him seem disconnected—not just from the electorate, but from the country itself. This dissonance was amplified by Dutton's broader campaign strategy. Many of his policy themes—cutting public service jobs, attacking work-from-home flexibility, and promising aggressive migration caps—felt like they had been airlifted from MAGA via Sky After Dark. And while Elon Musk's interventions in Europe (supporting the far-right AfD in Germany and Reform UK in Britain) sparked concern abroad, many Australians were quietly relieved that he hadn't yet tried to intervene more directly in our election. (Australia has, after all, gone after some of Musk's business interests.) That relief underscored the anxiety: the global right, embodied by Trump and Musk, was increasingly unhinged. And the Coalition was echoing far too much of it.

Labor, by contrast, offered a model of national leadership that felt stable, credible, and – crucially – Australian. When Trump's tariffs dropped, Albanese didn't just condemn them. He launched a "Buy Australia" campaign, urged consumers to back local producers, and made clear that Australia would defend its interests at the WTO if necessary. It was an approach that reassured voters: firm, not frantic. Grounded, not theatrical.

In the end, Trump's second presidency didn't just reframe global politics – it reframed the Australian campaign. Voters looked at the chaos in Washington and said: "Not here." They saw in Trump a warning—and in Dutton, too many echoes. They wanted something else.

Labor's message was simple: in a time of global instability, Australia required calm, not chaotic leadership. Preparation over provocation. That understands national strength comes not from shouting, but from knowing where you stand – and who you stand with.

Since the election, Albanese has been calling this idea "progressive patriotism."

Australia's Strategic Identity – AUKUS, Regional Influence, and Sovereignty

For all the drama of the 2025 campaign, one of the subdued but more consequential questions was this: Who are we, strategically? Australia's identity as a middle power – open, outward-looking, and anchored in regional diplomacy—was being tested as never before. The global outlook was threatening. The US was unpredictable. China was assertive. Russia was disruptive. The rules-based order, once an assumption, was now a contested ambition.

In this context, the 2025 election became, implicitly, a referendum on Australia's strategic self-definition. Labor made the case that Australia could no longer afford to outsource its security or its influence. It backed AUKUS, but not as a simple extension of American power. Instead, it presented AUKUS as a long-term investment in sovereign capability: nuclear-powered submarines, yes – but also domestic manufacturing, guided weapons production, and the industrial base to support future deterrence. The focus, increasingly, was on regional security – not Washington, not London, but our region, the Indo-Pacific.

Yet AUKUS remains a source of unease for many Australians, even within Labor's ranks. Critics see it as a Morrison-era legacy: a deal struck by Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson, then inherited by Labor under pressure. Labor's support for AUKUS is sometimes misinterpreted (or wish-cast) as reluctant, even performative. The government, for its part, has struggled to articulate a clear strategic rationale, partly because doing so would require publicly stating what is privately understood: that AUKUS is about deterring the CCP's military expansionism. And while that logic is broadly accepted in Canberra, it is rarely expressed in plain terms. This lack of articulation has created space for doubt. Many see AUKUS as too expensive, startled by the 30-year sticker price, never being told that the annual investment is just $11 billion (or about 0.5% of GDP). Others see it as too slow, pointing to the gap in our ability to deter CCP militarism over the next 3–10 years. Yet others see too much dependence on a US that no longer looks dependable. Trump's return made that concern feel urgent, but it's bigger than Trump: his vision of American global withdrawal is shared by a growing number of American voters. Australia cannot afford to assume that US support will always arrive when needed. The Fall of Singapore should've permanently taught Australians that relying too heavily on distant allies can leave a nation exposed.

The government needs to be clearer in its articulation of a simple defence paradigm: independent self-defence plus interdependent collective defence, in the manner of John Curtin. Our territorial defence must be self-reliant, but our contribution to regional peace must be agile – able to integrate with any partners according to their willingness, even in the absence of traditional allies. That's not about picking sides in a new Cold War. It's about ensuring that if conflict looms in the Indo-Pacific, Australia is neither irrelevant nor unprepared.

The election exposed something else: the limits of our national conversation about national security. Too often, defence debates are reduced to slogans about toughness or cost. But we need to be able to say, clearly, that investing in military capability is not warmongering. Democracies should not unilaterally disarm in an age of authoritarian imperial ambition. Nor should they ignore the non-military dimensions of national power: diplomacy, development, democratic integrity, social cohesion, and people-level relations. Labor's pitch in this space was imperfect but directionally coherent. It argued that Australia's security depends on relationships in the Pacific, in Southeast Asia, and yes, still with the US. But it also depends on judgment—on being clear-eyed about threats, careful with commitments, and serious about the tools—all the tools—required to preserve peace. In a region where the risks are growing and the certainties are shrinking, that may be the most important strategic identity of all: a country that understands itself, its neighbours, and the stakes at play.

Conclusion: Judgement, Trust, and the Foreign Policy Mandate

Foreign policy rarely dominates Australian election campaigns. It didn't in 2025 either—not overtly, at least. There was no foreign policy debate. No showdown over a war. No dramatic new alliance. During the campaign, everyone from Xi Jinping to Elon Musk was surprisingly quiet. But beneath the surface, international events shaped the atmosphere in which voters made their decisions—and shaped their sense of which leaders could be trusted to steer the country through uncertainty. Australians watched as Chinese warships sailed around the continent, as Russia floated baseless proposals in Indonesia, and as Donald Trump launched an economic war on the global trading system. They saw a world becoming more volatile, more transactional, and less predictable. And in that world, they looked for something very specific in their leaders: composure and values-based, pragmatic judgment.

Peter Dutton's campaign seemed to offer the opposite. His instinctive overreactions to unfolding events—whether it was the Chinese navy, the Russian airbase rumour, or Trump's tariffs—left voters uneasy. His defence policy arrived too late and said too little. His cultural rhetoric echoed too loudly the angry tones of American politics. And when Australians looked to him for a plan, they often found angry posture instead. The Albanese government, by contrast, offered a quieter kind of authority. It didn't always have perfect answers. But it had built the relationships, done the work, and understood the stakes. Its foreign policy was framed not by ideology but by geography: a focus on the Pacific, on Southeast Asia, and on Australia's capacity to defend itself and contribute to regional peace. It invested in diplomacy, in capability, and in the credibility that comes from turning up, listening, and standing firm. That approach didn't dominate the campaign headlines. But it shaped how Australians judged the candidates. In the end, they didn't vote for a grand foreign policy vision. They voted for steadiness. For competence. For a government that could navigate the world as it is—not as it once was, or as others might wish it to be.

Australia may not have had a foreign policy election in the traditional sense. But in 2025, it helped define what kind of leadership Australians were willing to trust. And they backed a stable, deliberate Labor government with a progressively patriotic vision for our future.

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Keynote Address – John Curtin Research Centre Gala Dinner, Melbourne – 12 March 2025

Richard Marles

We revere John Curtin as Australia's great wartime leader – standing up to Winston Churchill to bring our troops home to defend the country; his clarity of vision as early as November of 1936 about what conflict in the Pacific would mean for Australia; his understanding of great power relations with the United Kingdom, but also with the United States. And then on assuming office on October 7th in 1941, the way that, in short order, he organised our national defences, our national security in what would be our most perilous year, 1942.

Yet in the popular press, John Curtin was an unlikely pillar of Australia's national security. He had grown up literally spruiking the virtues of socialism on soapboxes on the street corners of Melbourne. He was a union leader, Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers Union, and played a leading role in the anti-conscription campaign in 1916 plebiscite that occurred during the First World War. But Curtin was not a pacifist. Curtin was strategically intelligent. Curtin was utterly committed to the Australian project, to Australian identity. In short, Curtin was an Australian patriot. And in all of that, Curtin was Labor to his bootstraps. Because one of the unheralded lineages of labour philosophy is that the Labor Party is the true party of Australia's national defence.

You can look at the great Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, and the creation of the Royal Australian Navy in 1913, which to this day, is the single biggest leap that's ever been taken in Australia's military capability.

You can look at another Labor Prime Minister, a veteran of World War Two, Gough Whitman, who unified the three service departments into a unified Department of Defence in 1973.

You can look at Kim Beasley, who gave rise to structured strategic thinking through the Dibb Review and the 1987 Defence White Paper, which really has served as the blueprint for defence policy for 35 years.

One of the great contributions that the Labor Party has made to our nation is through national security and defence. And yet again in the popular press, there would be a perception that defence is the brand strength of the conservatives, of the Liberal Party. There's no doubt that the Liberal Party certainly believe in their own publicity. They have a defence conceit. But the consequence of that defence conceit is that in respect of defence, it has made the Liberals lazy. This was never more exemplified than in the nine years of the Abbott Turnbull Morrison government. Over that period, there were three prime ministers, but perhaps just as significantly, there were six, really seven, different defence ministers. Because they did not see the job of the Minister of Defence as a responsibility, they saw it as a trophy.

Toward the end of the Rudd Gillard government, a decision was made that we needed to settle on a replacement of the Collins class submarines – the most important military platform that the Australian Defence Force has – with its end of life coming in the 2020s, right now. Yet, the Abbott government were in and out of an arrangement with Japan. Then the Turnbull and Morrison governments were in and out of a deal with France. It would not be for eight years before the Abbott Turnbull Morrison government finally fixed on a solution. Indeed, we might argue that the only reason they fixed on that solution is that they were voted out of office six months later, and it was Labor who fixed it.

They made an art form of making grand Defence announcements without putting any funding behind it – in relation to ships, missiles, more soldiers. By the time we came to office, there were $42 billion worth of defence commitments that they'd made without a single dollar behind it. Fully one quarter of what defence was required to procure, there was no money for. Obviously that represented an enormous deceit on the Australian people. But what it also meant was there was an army of public servants who were working on various defence projects in the complete knowledge that not all of them could come to fruition, because there simply wasn't money. But which

project succeeded and which failed was not a matter of strategic necessity, but simply which public servants were doing better. And in that moment, the Liberals let go of the strategic levers of our nation.

When they did spend money, they spent it badly – 28 different projects running a combined 97 years over time.

They appallingly mismanaged relationships with our nearest neighbours. They literally made jokes of our neighbouring countries in the Pacific.

They presided over a shrinking Defence Force. In the time that Peter Dutton was the Minister for Defence, the Defence Force shrunk by 1,400 personnel. And what we now know through the Defence Strategic Review is that in those final years of the Abbott Turnbull Morrison government, secretly but effectively they cut defence funding.

All of that meant that the legacy of the Abbott Turnbull Morrison government was to give to this country a lost defence decade at a time when we could least afford it.

When we came to office in May of 2022, it was clear that under the AUKUS arrangements there was no expectation of a new nuclearpowered submarine entering into service in the Royal Australian Navy until the early 2040s. Even with an extension in the life of Collins class, a capability gap had opened up of a decade. So one of the first challenges that we faced was reaching an arrangement, which we did, with the United Kingdom and the United States, which will see us purchase Virginia class submarines that will be in service in the Navy, not in the early 2040s but in the early 2030s, closing the capability gap.

We engaged in a root and branch review of our strategic landscape, understanding that the former government was really operating on a set of strategic assumptions that dated back to the Cold War. And yet we live in a very different world, one where we are seeing great power contest play out within our region, a contest the mode of which and the outcome of which is uncertain. And where we're seeing China engaging in the single biggest conventional military build-up the world has seen since the end of the Second World War.

All of that means that our strategic landscape is far more complex, and it is far more threatening. The threat is not that Australia is about to be invaded, the threat is that Australia can be coerced. Because as an island trading nation, with a growing percentage of our national income being dependent on trade, we are very reliant on a rulesbased order which underpins the physical economic connection between Australia and the rest of the world, our sea lines of communication, those sea lanes. And so the challenge for our Defence Force, for our military capability, is to defence those lanes. As it is to make our contribution to the collective peace and security of the region in which we live. Because it's very hard to conceive of the defence of Australia without conceiving of the defence of the countries to our north.

The insight that comes from those two observations is that the geography of our national security lies less on the coastline of our continent, but much further afield. And what that in turn means is that in terms of the military capability we must have, it must be able to project. That's why we need a capable, longrange submarine, but it's also why we need a highly capable surface fleet.

What we inherited was the oldest combatant surface fleet since the end of the Second World War, with no prospect of a new surface combatant entering the Navy until the mid-2030s. We've changed that. We've put the Navy on a trajectory to doubling the size of our surface combatants, with the newest of them being received by Australia in the 2020s.

We know that we need longer range missiles, and we know that we need a quantity of them which will make our arsenal relevant. But to achieve that, we simple have to make them here. So we're investing heavily in the establishment of a guided weapons and explosive ordnance industry in this country, and this is not in the never, never. Indeed the beginnings of that manufacture will happen this year.

We have totally changed the relationships with our near neighbours in defence terms – a step up in what we're doing with Korea and Japan; for the first time, joint sails with the Philippines; a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Indonesia; deeper and more extensive training with Singapore; the prospect of a Defence Cooperation Agreement now with Papua New Guinea; much greater engagement with Fiji and New Zealand; for the first time, the Indian initiated Malabar exercise is being held in Australia; remarkably, we've signed the first ever Defence Cooperation Agreement between Australia and the United Kingdom, and; force posture initiatives between Australia and America have also grown.

We are dealing with defence recruitment. This year we will enlist 5,800 personnel. That's the biggest enlistment into the Australian Defence Force since 2008. It means we can stand here on this day and say that at last, again, the Australian Defence Force is growing. And because we have a strategic clarity in what we're doing, we're able to make difficult decisions which makes the defence budget sharper, and makes the quality of the defence spend so much better. And yet we also understand that we have to increase that spend, and that's what we've been doing – $50 billion in the budget over the next 10 years, more than $5 billion in the forward estimates. Together they represent the single biggest peacetime increase in Australia's defence budget since the end of the Second World War. And it's actually happening right now. If you look at the financial year '23-24 defence has spent its largest ever amount out the door on defence procurement and this year will be larger again.

But while we've been doing all of this, there is absolutely no sign that the Liberals have put their defence house back in order. They are still making policy on the run.

We saw a couple of weeks ago an idea that if elected they would seek to purchase a new squadron of F-35s, as if there is an F-35 shop, which I can tell you there isn't. There is no prospect of any of those planes entering into service for

years and years to come. But even then, the $3 billion which they have put aside for this, they acknowledge will not cover the maintenance or sustainment of the aircraft, will not cover the housing of the aircraft, or, more importantly, will not cover the pilots who will fly them. The F-35s are an exquisite platform. They greatly increase the capability and lethality of the Royal Australian Air Force. But it is to state the obvious that an F-35 sitting on the ground doesn't do anything.

We have watched the Liberals breathlessly wave their fists at China, as we have seen a Chinese task group in the vicinity of Australia over the last few weeks. They have implored our government to do something, but exactly what they would have us do is not at all clear. What we have done, is we have surveyed that task group in an unprecedented way, with both Navy and Air Force assets, so that we know where it has gone, what it has done and the exercises it has practiced. And that has stood in stark contrast to what the Liberals did not do three years ago when there was a Chinese navy warship in the vicinity of Australia. They've utterly missed the point that the Royal Australian Navy operates much more in the proximity of China than the Chinese navy operates in the vicinity of Australia. And this is not gratuitous. That's because this is where our sea lanes are, that's where we need to be asserting freedom of navigation. But they would have had us fall into the trap of establishing a standard in relation to the Chinese task group here, which would have greatly inhibited the activities of the Royal Australian Navy there.

Then, in the last two weeks, we have seen the astonishing and shameful stance that Peter Dutton has now taken in relation to Ukraine.

Let's be clear, three years ago, Russia invaded Ukraine. Not by reference to international law, but by reference to power and might. And so, what is happening there is a defence of Ukraine, but what is happening there is also a defence of the global rulesbased order upon which we rely. And so first the Morrison government and then ours, has stood in steadfast support of Ukraine over the last three years. $1.3 billion worth of military support. And we've understood that we have been doing that, with the bipartisan support of the Liberal Party.

In the last two weeks, that now appears to be changing. There is the prospect from our friends and allies of a request for Australia to provide peacekeepers in a certain scenario. And what we have said in relation to that request is that we would consider it in good faith, seeking to do what we can, as we have considered every request that we've received over the last three years. But already Peter Dutton has utterly ruled that out. He cites capacity constraints with the Australian Defence Force. He says that he doesn't want to see Australian personnel based in Europe. And yet, there are already Australian serving men and women in Europe, in Great Britain right now training the Ukrainian Armed Forces. And we hear, astonishingly, his shadow minister now say that he believes the rules-based order is dead and buried. We have a very different view. We stand with Ukraine and we stand in defence of the global rulesbased order.

What we are seeing from the Liberals right now is a shameless attempt to create political division in respect of defence. Because for them, defence is not about Australia's national interest. Defence is only about their political opportunity.

Perhaps most astonishingly is the stubborn refusal of the Liberals to support Labor's increase in defence spending. All we get are these vague assertions that they will always spend more, they will always be better than Labor when it comes to defence. They ask us to accept the vibe of the thing – defence philosophy straight from the mouth of Dennis Denuto.

This next election will principally and rightly be fought on the basis of cost of living, on access to affordable healthcare, to education, on jobs and real wage increases. We really look forward to that contest.

But as you look at news abroad, as you feel a sense of unease about what is happening to the world today, it is completely obvious that who governs Australia over the next three years will have a profound impact on our national security, over our defence and strategic policy. It will have an impact on the country that we hand to our children and to our grandchildren.

The Liberals are offering nothing more than a chaotic set of ramblings, a return to the lost defence decade. When it comes to defence, they are lazy and indolent. Their ideas are hair brain and they are populist.

What we offer is an Albanese Government that will be thoughtful about our strategic circumstances. That will protect our national sovereignty. That will defend Australia. A Labor government in the grandest tradition of John Curtin.


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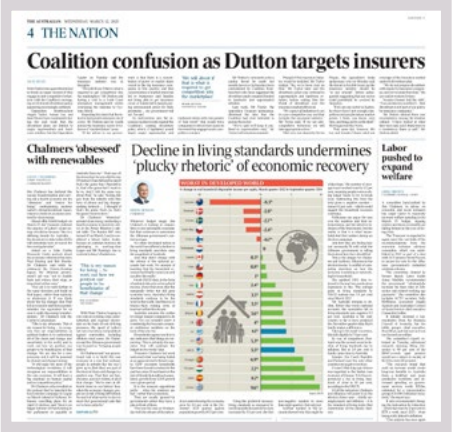
News and Views


THE AUSTRALIAN
Wednesday, May 14, 2025
HOME BUSINESS NATION
EXCLUSIVE
Hastie tells Labor-aligned podcast of 'desire to lead' the Liberal Party


Labor must keep a close eye on this 'trend': inside the politics of younger voters
By Patricia Karvelas
Government and Politics
More than half a million gen Z voters will cast their ballots for the first time at the upcoming federal election. (ABC NEWS: Nick McAllister)

War on woke won't work in Australia
It's cost-of-living, not trans issues, keeping suburban voters awake at night
NICK DYRENFURTH

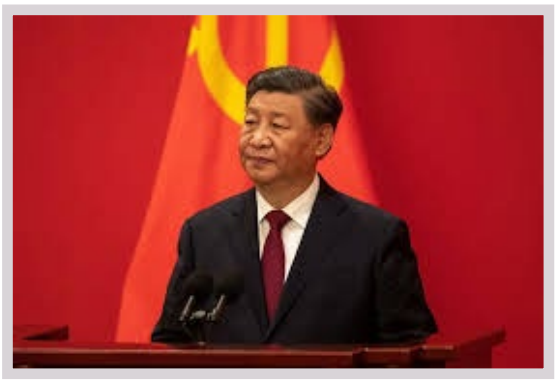

4 THE NATION
Coalition confusion as Dutton targets insurers
Chalmers 'obsessed' with renewables
Decline in living standards undermines 'plucky rhetoric' of economic recovery
Labor pushed to expand welfare


Extend, not change, the date
Nick Dyrenfurth
Noel Pearson argued for marking Australia Day over January 25 and 26 as a "noble" compromise between old and new.


Features
Young males are leaning right, but not all to Dutton
Labor faces a reckoning among young working-class men
Rear Window


OPINION
Spilling tea on 2025 but it's not green
Labor must adopt MPs who believe in a left-conservatism but recoil at social extremism.


Daring Labor to drain the Canberra billabong
Nick Dyrenfurth
If Labor wants to win, it must rediscover why it was put on this earth

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Andrew Hastie reveals 'desire to lead' Liberals one day after Sussan Ley takes top job


THE wire
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Labor faces a reckoning among young working-class men
Comment
Nick Dyrenfurth
This alienation is particularly acute among young men in regional and outer-suburban areas.


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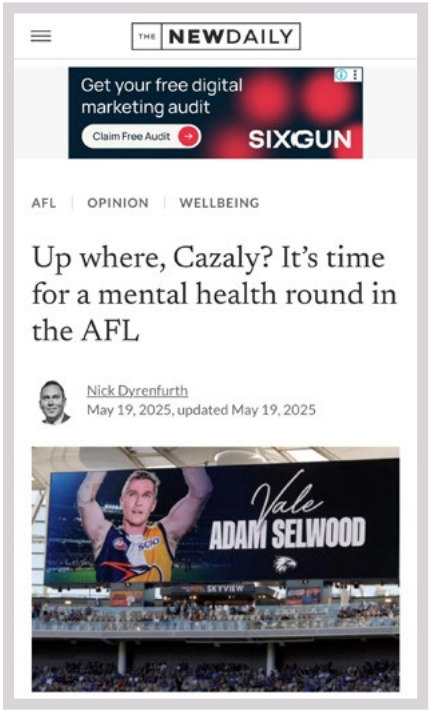
Australia unveils sanctions on 79 entities over Russia's invasion of Ukraine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Nick Dyrenfurth
May 19, 2025, updated May 19, 2025
Vale ADAM SELWOOD


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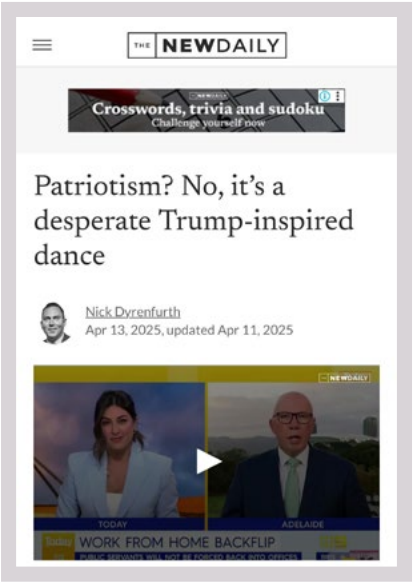
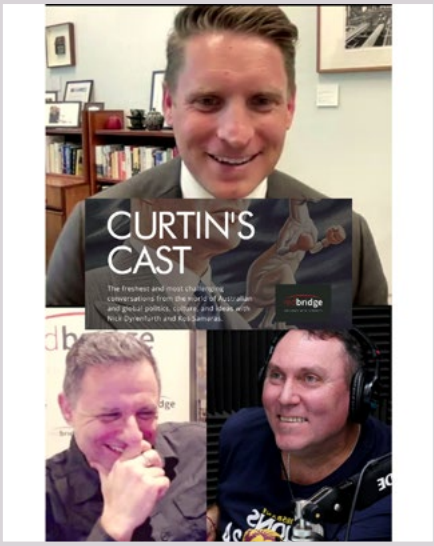
CURTIN'S CAST


Gen Z aren't voting left or right, they want to smash the system


PERIL OF IGNORING
OLDER VOTERS

News and Views






THE NIGHTLY
OPINION
GET AUSTRALIA BACK ON TRACK
War on woke won't work in Australia
It's cost-of-living, not trans issues, keeping suburban voters awake at night
NICK DYRENFURTH


THE wire
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Deputy Director & Chief Economist Dr Dom Meagher discussing today's promising #inflation numbers:
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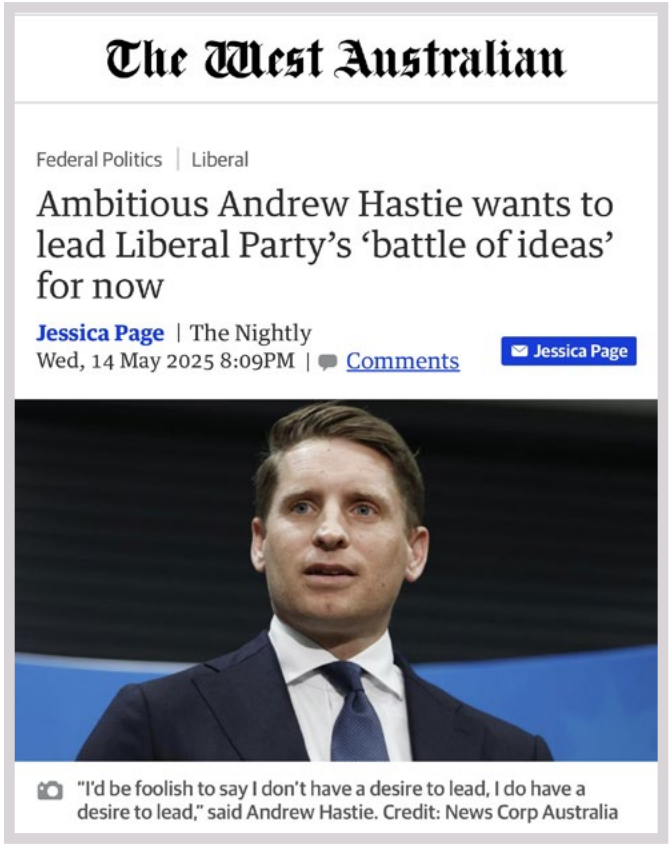
The West Australian
Federal Politics | Liberal
Ambitious Andrew Hastie wants to lead Liberal Party's 'battle of ideas' for now
Jessica Page | The Nightly
Wed, 14 May 2025 8:09PM | Comments
Jessica Page
"I'd be foolish to say I don't have a desire to lead, I do have a desire to lead," said Andrew Hastie. Credit: News Corp Australia


AFTERNOON BRIEFING
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Greens deserve savage backlash
Nick Dyrenfurth


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Opinion
Labor's identity reckoning among young working-class men
In a world of gender quotas and corporate diversity and inclusion strategies, these men see their concerns treated not just as secondary but as suspect.
Nick Dyrenfurth
Researcher
Apr 28, 2025 - 1.39pm

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GALA DINNER
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Labor ideas for a better, fairer Australia

Getting to Know ... JCRC Board Member Priya Brown

Author

What got you interested in unionism and politics?

It was a bit of an accident to be honest. My dad's side of the family were historically Labor members and supporting the ALP was the only option I was given as a child. No topic was off the table at family dinner and my dad was incredible encouraging of my sister and I being as opinionated as possible. We grew up in a relatively affluent blue ribbon Liberal seat and as I got older, I really enjoyed that my dad was one of the only parents at school that voted Labor and wasn't afraid to say it – he's always had a bit of a rebellious streak which is potentially genetic.

However, knowing I was a Labor voter and knowing "why" I was a Labor voter didn't really happen until I was at university. I became friendly with a number of unionists and Labor members who showed me that my values were Labor values and how important the power of the collective is when pushing for fairness and equality.

Tell us about your working life

With the exception of a couple of retail jobs at school I have only ever worked in and around politics. I was lucky enough to get a part time job while at university at the Missos at 19 and by the time I graduated we were heading into election season. I worked full time on 6 state campaigns and a federal campaign in 18 months – after that I was hooked. I've been lucky enough to experience the full spectrum of roles from working in the union movement, working in the offices of Labor MPs, Federal and State Government staffing and now GR consulting.

What is the one big policy problem facing Australia and the solution?

That's a big question so I'm going to go with an issue I'm particularly passionate about stemming from working for a union that represented low paid predominantly female workers.

One of the most persistent and structural policy challenges facing Australia is gender inequality. Despite decades of progress, women continue to earn less than men, shoulder the majority of unpaid care, and face disproportionate barriers to leadership, financial security, and safety – particularly First Nations women, women with disabilities, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The gender pay gap remains stubborn, superannuation disparities are stark, and the impacts of insecure work, especially in feminised sectors like aged care and early childhood education, compound these inequities across a woman's life. These are not just individual disadvantages - they are systemic failures that weaken our economy and social fabric.

The solution requires a whole-of-government, structural approach that embeds gender equity into economic and social policymaking. We must close the gender pay gap through stronger workplace laws, transparency measures, and a proper valuing of care work. Investing in universal, high-quality early childhood education, expanding paid parental leave with greater equality between partners, and boosting superannuation contributions for carers will help balance the scales across a lifetime. We also need to hardwire gender impact assessments into the budget process to ensure every decision – tax, housing, infrastructure – contributes to a more equal future. This isn't just the right thing to do; it's nation-building. True economic reform in Australia must be feminist at its core.

What do you like to get up to outside of work?

I have a 3-year-old so a lot of time at playgrounds and trying not to direct her to put the right furniture in the right spots in her dolls house...

Tell our supporters an unusual fact about yourself?

I have hypermobility syndrome so I can perform some pretty great party tricks that involve dislocating limbs!

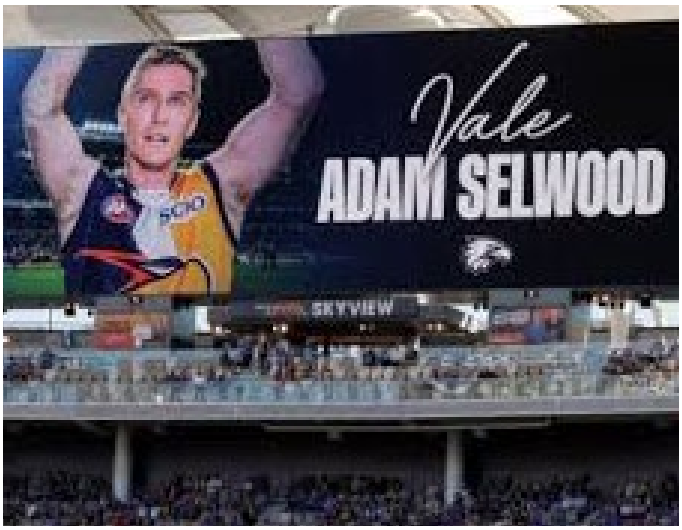
Any advice for young activists?

Get involved, not just opinionated - It's easy to be loud on social media or critical from the sidelines. But change happens in the rooms where decisions are made. Show up, do the work, and earn respect.

Find a mentor and be one later - There are people in the movement who've been fighting the good fight for decades. Learn from them—not just their victories, but their scars. Later, pay it forward. The strength of the Labor movement has always been intergenerational.

Up Where Cazaly? It's Time for a Mental Health Round in the AFL

Nick Dyrenfurth



The tragic death of former West Coast premiership player Adam Selwood at just 41 is another devastating reminder of the mental health epidemic gripping young Australians, especially men – including those who once seemed invincible on the field. Selwood's passing isn't just a personal tragedy for his family; it's a national crisis behoving a national response.

In the footy world, symbolism matters. The AFL has turned themed rounds into cultural cornerstones – from the magnificent Indigenous Round to AFW Pride Round, Anzac Day and the more recent Gather Round – each designed to celebrate, educate or commemorate. Yet one gaping omission persists: mental health. In an era where the greatest sport on this earth prides itself on being "more than just a game," this oversight borders on negligence.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data, suicide is the leading cause for one in three men and women aged 15–24 and more than one in five people aged 25–44 in 2023 – the AFL's core demographics, and the age bracket of most players. Suicide accounts for nearly double the next highest causes: accidental poisoning and land transport accidents. The 25-44 age group graphically illustrates the maleness of our national crisis: in 2023, 15.4% of deaths in females aged 25–44 were due to suicide, but for males that number is 25.1%.

These aren't just statistics; they're stories of mates, sons and daughters, mums and dads – and yes, players – lost to mental illness. They include the names we dare not forget: Shane Tuck, Cam McCarthy, the Selwood brothers, and perhaps most poignantly, Danny "Spud" Frawley.

Frawley's death in 2019 shocked the footy world, not least because of his post-playing role as a mental health advocate. A fierce competitor turned gentle educator; Frawley laid bare his own battles in the hope that others might find strength in speaking up. His legacy lives on in Spud's Game, a fixture launched by St Kilda – the club he loved – to honour his mission.

'Spud's Game: Time 2 Talk' has grown into a powerful, moving tribute. It's more than a football match. It's a platform for conversation, a fundraiser for mental health initiatives, and a living reminder of how silence can turn to tragedy. And yet, while Spud's Game is admirable, it remains a club-led initiative. The AFL supports it, promotes it, but still hasn't gone further. Why not elevate it? Why not enshrine it across all nine games in a dedicated Mental Health Round? Not just to honour Frawley, but to honour everyone in the footy community – from local volunteers to elite athletes – who grapples with the black dog.

Contrast this with the league's response to other worthy causes. The Indigenous Round, now Sir Doug Nicholls Round, has rightly grown into one of the most celebrated weeks on the calendar. Pride Round, too, has opened hearts and minds. Breast cancer, motor neuron disease, gender equity, domestic violence – all find space on the AFL stage. Yet the leading cause of death for young and middle-aged women and men? This must change now.

This isn't a call to abandon any existing rounds – far from it. It's a plea to add one more, as leading former player mental health advocate Wayne Schwass urges. Done properly, it could be transformative. AFL and local footy clubs could share player stories, partner with mental health organisations, offer free counselling services at games, and spark difficult conversations among fans. And most importantly, it could save lives.

One of the AFL's greatest strengths is its emotional grip on Australians, especially blokes. It can reach people where government campaigns and health ads fall short. When a club like Richmond speaks, its fans listen. When a player opens up about their mental health, it resonates across locker rooms, pubs, and living rooms in a way few institutions can.

The AFL Players Association has made mental health a key concern. But without the league throwing its full weight behind the cause, we're left with piecemeal programs and

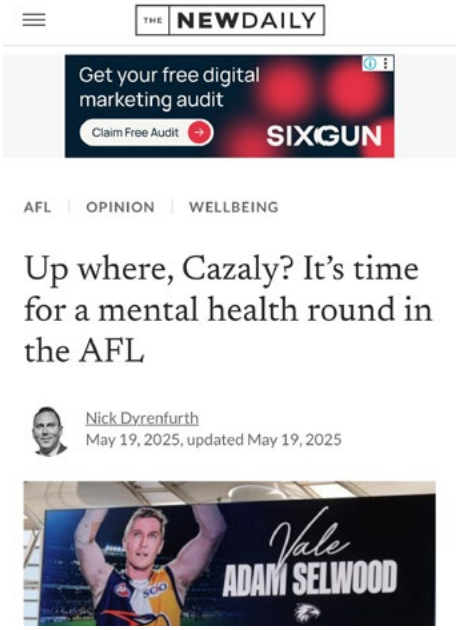
after-the-fact tributes. It shouldn't take another tragic death for the AFL to act. Yes, some might argue we already talk about mental health "enough." But if that were true, suicide wouldn't be our leading cause of death for people in their prime. If that were true, we wouldn't lose former elite athletes – men who appeared strong, fit, and invincible – to darkness and desperate acts. If that were true, thousands of ordinary footy fans wouldn't be suffering in silence.

The AFL has made progress. Coaches and the media speak more openly about stress, anxiety, and depression. We see fewer eyerolls when players take time off to protect their mental health. Regardless, it's easy to hold themed rounds when the issues are uncontroversial or celebratory. It's harder when the subject is uncomfortable, messy, and ongoing. Exactly why we need a Mental Health Round. To pierce the silence. To name the problem. To put resources behind it. To honour those we've lost, and support those still fighting.

The AFL has a platform. It has money. It has influence. And a moral obligation to act.

A dedicated AFL Mental Health Round would be a bloody good place to start.

Nick Dyrenfurth is Executive Director of the John Curtin Research Centre



Creswick-Clunes ALP Branch 2025 John Curtin Oration

Frank Bongiorno

John Curtin, born in Creswick: the district in which we are gathered here today has perhaps contributed more than any other to the Australian labour movement, as the home not only of Curtin, the son of a policeman, but of W.G. Spence and the new unionism of the miners and shearers. Curtin lived long enough to see the defeat of Germany, but not of Japan. He had a heart attack in November 1944 and was invalid for much of the remainder of his life. His death came early on the morning of 5 July 1945. 'The captain has been stricken within sight of the shore,' his deputy, Frank Forde, told a hushed House of Representatives. Curtin's body lay in King's Hall, where thousands 'passed by with tear-blurred eyes'. Chifley, 'most visibly affected', did his best to 'conceal his feelings' in the manner of Australian working-class masculinity of the time, even as he kept gazing back at the casket during the Parliament House memorial service. That hard man of the New South Wales Labor Party, Jack Beasley, removed his glasses to wipe away a tear with his handkerchief.

The Labor Party does a good funeral. There was none better than this one. An RAAF plane carried Curtin's body inside its shiny oak casket, over Parliament House and then the Lodge before heading west across the continent. The plane arrived in Perth in a 'slight drizzle'. A hushed crowd of thousands lined the streets the following day, a Sunday, as the gun carriage draped in a blue ensign – the Australian Flag, as we know it – carried the casket past the family home, and then towards Karrakatta Cemetery, accompanied by a slow drumbeat and 'women . . . weeping unrestrainedly'. Along the way, a group of 500 trade unionists formed a vanguard for the funeral procession as it made its way to the cemetery. Curtin was buried near the state's most famous son, John Forrest, Baron Forrest of Bunbury, beneath the pine, peppermint and gum trees. On 15 August Prime Minister Ben Chifley announced the end of the war that many believed had helped kill his comrade. He had been too upset to attend the funeral in Perth.

Times of crisis can also be times for building. John Curtin demonstrated this truth better than any other politician in the country's history. A man of peace and committed socialist from his youth, Curtin found himself at the national helm in a time of war. The unlikeliest of warlords, he led, and managed to keep together, a turbulent government with many big personalities.

Curtin became prime minister of Australia on 7 October 1941. It was not the result of an election. Rather, two Independent members of the House of Representatives changed sides, withdrawing their support for the Fadden government, transferring it to the Labor Party.

Labor had nearly won the 1940 election, but Curtin almost lost his seat. It is easy enough to reimagine this as a sliding doors moment in which Curtin does not become prime minister at all, and instead lives out the rest of his life as an ailing labour journalist in Perth.

There are other possible sliding doors in Curtin's career. He could have disintegrated into debilitating alcoholism.

He might not have won the Labor leadership ballot by a single vote in 1935.

He could have succumbed to one of the offers from Menzies to form a national or all-party government in 1940-41.

And what if Menzies' government had not been weakened by a place crash near Canberra in which he lost three of his ministers as well as the Chief of General Staff? What if Menzies' government had limped through to December 1941, had been there when the Japanese air force had bombed Pearl Harbor? Would there ever have been a Curtin Labor government? Perhaps our political history would have been closer to Britain's, with a postwar Labor government led by Chifley rather than a wartime one.

And would Menzies have resisted Churchill and Roosevelt over the diversion of troops to Burma in 1942, in the way that Curtin did? Would we think of ourselves as a nation in quite the same way without that moment?

History always has an air of inevitability about it

because we read it backwards, from the present.

But imagine what the prospects for Labor in government might have looked like to a reasonably impartial observer in October 1941.

Labor had governed twice since 1914. On the first occasion, it disintegrated under the pressure of World War I, splitting over conscription. It was in opposition until 1929.

The second time, in a government led by James Scullin – also of this region – to which Curtin belonged as a backbencher, it had lasted barely two years, falling apart over how to deal with the Depression. On this occasion, it split three ways, not two. It spent another decade in opposition.

Anyone who imagined that it had to different on this occasion – third time lucky – would have needed to be an incorrigible optimist. And if they were optimistic on 7 October 1941, I wonder how they might have felt when, almost immediately, there was an internal party revolt against the size of a pension increase in the government's first budget? In other words, one of the earliest instincts of some Caucus members was to humiliate Curtin and his new treasurer, Ben Chifley.

That brings us to Curtin's team. Any leader who could keep this team facing more or less the same way at the same time deserves our undying admiration. Curtin had long been a great party man. But there were all kinds of traps for him in the 1930s when he became leader. He managed to negotiate pretty much all of them. Labor's isolationism in relation to European crises – in Ethiopia and Spain – was well designed to keep the Catholic right and the secular left in the same camp. The party was divided in New South Wales, where Jack Lang still exerted power, but Curtin held the line and managed to draw key Langites, such as Jack Beasley and Eddie Ward, back into the federal party in 1936. Curtin had credibility in such circles because as a Western Australian MHR, he was something of an outsider to the pathologies of NSW Labor, but also because he had credibility on the left as a socialist who had tried to hold out against conservative economic policy in the Depression. When there was another split in 1940 that saw some old Langites leave again, Curtin held his nerve, and they were back in the tent the following year.

That tent could be a rather untidy, rowdy one. It's worth reminding ourselves of the kinds of people he had to manage. Yes, there was his friend Ben Chifley, another victim of the landslide of 1931. There was no one more solid than Chifley in opposing Lang during the 1930s – from outside parliament, unlike Curtin. There was a talented minister in John Dedman, a (British) Gallipoli veteran, former dairy farmer and ex-Country Party man, who entered the parliament at a 1940 by-election for Corio. Frank Forde, Norman Makin and Arthur Drakeford were solid and reliable, not stars.

There were stars of a sort, but they were not always solid and reliable. Bert Evatt was there from 1940, having come from the High Court. A brilliant man to be sure, he was constantly plotting – for a national all-party government, for instance, and therefore against Curtin. There is evidence he was still plotting against Curtin in 1943. His abilities were great, his ambition insatiable.

His plotting was often with Jack Beasley, better know as Stabber Jack – a nickname he did not pick up at Sunday school. He was one of the splitters of 1940 but turned out a capable enough minister.

There was Eddie Ward, another old Langite; his outpourings over the reputed existence of the Brisbane Line were fictions, and Curtin thought him a 'bloody ratbag', although the prime minister still allowed the Brisbane Line stuff to run for electoral purposes. This was Curtin's Machiavellianism, to which I'll return in admiration in a moment.

And Arthur Calwell, with his powerful Victorian base, and his long wait to get into parliament – which he did, finally, in 1940 – was in no mood to refrain from throwing his weight around. He was among the ringleaders of the opposition to Curtin's successful attempt to introduce a limited form of overseas conscription in 1943.

Curtin had a shrewd appreciation of the play of power, faction, ideology and personality in the labour movement. I believe he was Labor's greatest ever party man. And what a party Curtin led! Even allowing for the undoubted loyalty and talent of several key ministers, could anyone else really have held such a team together? His whole approach to party leadership was haunted by 1916 and 1931, by Billy Hughes and by Joe Lyons.

Curtin was determined he would never be one of those: a Labor rat. If he helped save Australia, he also helped save the ALP as a credible force in Australian politics. Every subsequent national government is in his debt.

His resistance to the effort to draw Labor into a national cross-party government illustrates his methodology well. Whenever Menzies put a proposal to him, Curtin would take it to his party, which would duly reject it on each occasion – in line with formal party policy toward coalitions. This was Curtin's style. There was one very prominent enthusiast for a national government within the party: Evatt. But Curtin understood that the entry of the Labor Party into a national government would almost certainly have produced a major split.

Curtin pretended to Menzies he didn't want government, that he'd be content to see out the war as Leader of the Opposition. This is Curtin, again, as Machiavelli and Menzies as a babe in the political woods. Of course Curtin wanted government – on his terms, not Menzies'!

Curtin also carried the party on conscription: he didn't try to appeal over its head, as Hughes had in 1916. Curtin asked for as much as he thought the party would give him and accepted what it was prepared to grant. No more.

And while he managed to give middle-class voters the impression that he had put his socialism aside, for his Labor colleagues and supporters there were new instalments on the welfare state, controls over the banking system that

Scullin could only dream of back in the Depression, and a new stream of revenue for the federal government in the form of income taxes previously levied by the states. The foundations of policies for full employment and public housing were laid before the war's end. He did understand a crisis as an opportunity, even if he put winning the war ahead of all else.

What might Curtin mean for us today?

We are living through a period when there is declining faith in political parties and the party system seems to be fragmenting. The political parties themselves often do not conform to decent democratic norms; many voters are looking elsewhere, to minor parties and independents.

Yet Curtin, who had been a member of the Victorian Socialist Party as a young man, one of its enthusiastic Marxists, was above all a party man: he believed that Labor was the best instrument – indeed, the only effective instrument – for achieving a just society and lasting reform. There is surely something in that for us today as we contemplate why political parties, such as the Australian Labor Party, are still worthy of our loyalty or support.

Curtin's was not a blind faith – he was all too aware of the frailties of movement and party, that it comprised flesh and blood men and women with weaknesses as well as strengths. People like him, really. But the core principles and structures of party and movement were, in his view, sound. Curtin was a classic group leader, to use a term from political psychology: a man who was at once leader and servant. He lived and died a man of modest means.

The Labor Party was, for Curtin, part of a wider social movement, a living organism, not merely a machine for capturing political power. Labor, if it is to be the force for transformation that Curtin believed was its mission, needs to keep alive that sense of itself.

This is an edited version of Frank Bongiorno's Creswick-Clunes ALP Branch 2025 John Curtin Oration delivered at Clunes Town Hall, 15 March 2025


"FOR 20 months the Labor Government has kept you safe. The Labor Government is the victory Government.

And what of the post-war period?

We are determined to develop this country and its resources to assure to every Australian a national minimum standard of income, and social services which will leave him in no envy of any other country. We are preparing the plans now.

We shall not tolerate an uncontrolled, speculative post-war boom which dissolves into the prolonged depression of ruined homes and wasted lives.

We will assist primary and secondary industry through a smooth transition to stable prosperity."

A vote for your Official LABOR Candidate is a vote for the Safety and Security of Australia.

"The pursuit of knowledge is far more important than even knowledge itself. It involves discipline and training, which, in turn are moulders of character."

John Curtin, April 1932

Sam Freedman, Failed State: Why Things Go Wrong and How We Can Fix Them, Macmillan, 2024

David Connah

It has long been a national pastime for Australians to look at Britain and shake our heads with a mix of affection, frustration, and relief. The sense that we dodged a bullet somewhere in the late 19th century, when we kept the cockney accents but not the institutions, remains strong. But the purpose of Sam Freedman's Failed State is not to entertain this reflex. Instead, he offers a damning account of how one of the world's oldest democracies has found itself overwhelmed by its own operating model. In doing so, Failed State raises uncomfortable questions for all Westminster-derived systems—including our own.

Freedman writes his book as a former adviser to a Conservative education secretary and in a setting where over two thirds in Britain say the country is in decline. His main argument, however, is that Britain's political system is in decline, not Britain itself. The book is therefore not concerned with over-the-top political scandals or personalities, though plenty are mentioned. Instead, Freedman convincingly offers a diagnosis of the slow decay in state capacity, and the incentives, structures, and expectations that have made good government in Britain increasingly impossible to deliver. In his view, the current crisis is not one of economy, society, or democracy. It is a crisis of governance.

The book breaks the problem into three parts. First, the British state is overloaded. Freedman argues that the British central government tries to do too much with too little because, compared to other democracies, power is heavily concentrated in Westminster, and even more narrowly in Whitehall. Local government has been hollowed out since the 1980s of money, talent, and authority. National leaders are expected to run health systems, schools, and regional growth through departments that have neither the expertise nor the time. The result is central government doing work it is poorly equipped to manage and being blamed when it fails.

Second, the executive is overpowered. Never before has parliament, the civil service, and the judiciary been as constrained as it is today. Freedman is careful not to romanticise any one institution. (This is not a book that yearns for the "good old days" of patrician rule). But he makes a compelling case that Britain has traded in an effective system of checks and balances for one in which a prime minister with a majority in the Commons can do almost anything with little real accountability. When decision-making is this centralised, and scrutiny this weak, it is only a matter of time, Freedman argues, before poor outcomes become common. In this sense, sadly, even the most capable ministers are set up to fail.

Finally, the whole system is in overdrive. Freedman writes candidly about his time in government, and the pressure to deliver new lines for the morning bulletin rather than real reform. The headline-greedy news media of today rewards politicians who speak in announcements rather than outcomes. The media cycle is equally restless and relentless. The result is a political class driven by cringey communications over credible competence. And as the quality of outcomes deteriorates, public trust in government inevitably goes with it.

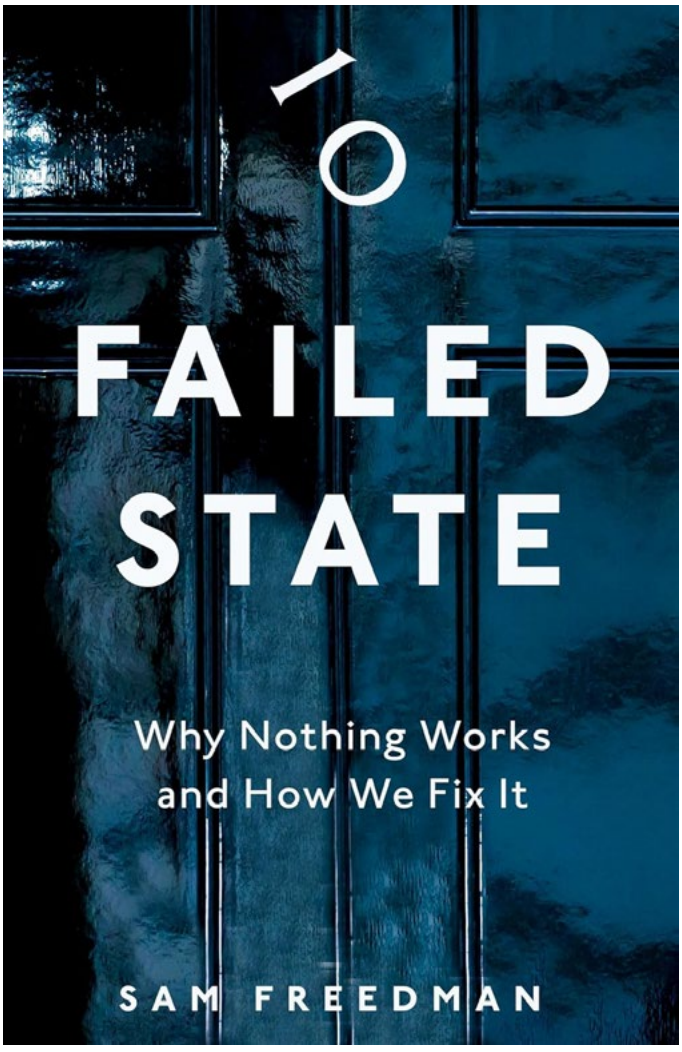
None of these three problems—overloaded, overpowered, overdriven—are unique to Britain. But Freedman argues that their combination in the UK system has made governance particularly toxic. And the effects are plain to see. Dangerously long hospital waiting times, daily train cancellations, illegal discharge of raw sewage in rivers, record high child poverty rates, and of course, the worst housing crisis in decades. These are not one-off policy failures, Freedman scolds. They are symptoms of a government that lacks both the structure and the space to govern well.

There are several lessons here for Australia. We have, at least on paper, a more devolved system of government in Australia than in Britain. Our states and territories still play an active role in public service delivery. Our political parties are generally less centralised than their counterparts

in Westminster. Our public service, though under immense pressure in recent years, remains arguably more people-centric and responsive than Whitehall. Yet, elements of Freedman's story will feel familiar to any Australian public servant, policymaker or punter.

Announcement-driven politics is increasingly everyday business here. Public service delivery grows increasingly dependent on a small number of central agencies in Canberra. The weakening of institutional memory—and fatigue, frankly—through constant churn. Long-term reform is unfortunately sidelined in favour of short-term wins.

So too is the steady erosion of trust in the political system. As Freedman wryly notes, politicians now rank lower than real-estate agents on measures of public confidence in Britain. Australia is certainly not far behind. This disconnection has many causes—economic, cultural, and media-driven, to name a few—but it is dangerously exacerbated by a larger problem: 'when governments appear unable or unwilling to deliver basic competence, the public stops listening'. The consequences are chilling: participation in democratic processes shrinks, cynicism grows, and problematic radical alternatives are given space to rise.



`What makes Failed State compelling is its refusal to settle for nostalgia or quick fixes. Freedman does not imagine a return to some mythical golden age of British politics. Nor does he place his faith in charismatic leaders. He argues instead for structural reform, one that is slow, difficult, but necessary. The most important of these is the decentralisation of power: to local and regional governments, to stronger parliamentary committees, and to a rebuilt and re-skilled civil ('public') service.

To his credit, Freedman is not naïve. He recognises that decentralisation comes with its own risks because local governments will sometimes fail and mismanagement is an inevitable reality. But this, he argues, is far better than the centralised system du jour, where failure is constant and unaccountable. Spreading power spreads responsibility, risk, and innovation. But if everything is centralised, one crack can bring the whole thing down.

That principle applies here too. Australia's federation has given us some buffers against the brittleness of British politics. But it would be wrong to assume these buffers are permanent and protected. It is easy to lose public sector expertise, parliamentary scrutiny, and public trust, and much harder to regain. We face the same global pressures of climate change, housing unaffordability, the rise of misinformation as Britain, and our current systems are not well built to handle. Thankfully, good people are still in the system, but having good systems is the only way to avoid the same fate as Britain because when systems fail, the damage is rarely abstract.

In the end, Failed State is not a book about Britain as an island on its own. It is a case study in what happens when political systems stop working as intended and when the pipes get so clogged that even decent leaders, let alone mediocre ones, fail to run them. Freedman's argument is simple: to fix politics, you have to fix the system. There is no substitute for good institutions.

Australian readers would do well to hear Freedman's warning because we should indeed know why things go wrong and, more importantly, how we can fix them.

David Connah works at the intersection of policy, infrastructure, and strategy across public, private, and political sectors. He has led election efforts at all levels, contributed to urban and economic policy development, and held special advisory roles across Australia, China, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. A graduate of the ANU, Connah supports building fairer, better-connected communities, and spends most of his time thinking about how to make policy more practical, hopeful, and human.

Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, Abundance: How We Build a Better Future, Avid Reader Press, 2025

Aman Gaur

Abundance, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, is one of the rare books written by policy wonks that pierces the popular imagination, much like Capital by Thomas Piketty. While the author's popularity in their respective fields has contributed to Abundance's appeal, especially in centre-left circles, the book's revelatory insights into public policy have made it a New York Times Bestseller.

Abundance starts with a mission statement for the year 2050 – how can we create a society of abundant clean energy, leisure time, medicines, homes and much more? Pointedly, it contrasts the speed with which infrastructure was built in the United States in the first half of the 20th century with the time and costs delays bedevilling projects in the latter half.

The proof points are startling. From the decades required to build high-speed rail in California (which is still not complete), the unacceptable time and costs required to build housing or even a public toilet and the eye-watering administrative processes that swamp scientists and dampen innovation.

Klein and Thompson write clearly and succinctly about the challenges facing development, identifying the good intentions of American progressives as the villains impeding fast and efficient projects. Community consultations, legal appeal rights, commercial tendering, diversity and procurement assessments are all cited as the source of time delays and increased cost, inhibiting the provision of essential goods like homes and infrastructure. Notably, the authors agree that the principle behind each of these processes is valid and worthwhile but as a sum, regularly undermines the goals of projects.

The book is well researched and written by two policy journalists, and this is reflected in both its pace and accessibility. There is much in Abundance for Australian progressives to consider in addressing the challenges facing our country given that many of the issues outlined by Klein and Thompson are impeding countless projects across Australia.

In its core philosophy, Klein and Thompson are putting forward a political agenda around supply-side progressivism, which argues that our focus should be on creating an abundance of essential goods to improve people's lives. It corners on supporting science and innovation to solve for climate technologies, while addressing regulations which limit housing supply and enable anti-competitive conduct.

Focussing on housing and climate, two issues that dominated our recent federal election, there are clear ideas for consideration. Our focus must be on supply of housing and balancing regulations that create limits on supply and delay against the societal good from more affordable housing. It needs to be kept front of mind that Australians have some of the highest private debt in the world, that most of this is in housing, on which we pay eye-watering interest and presents as one of the most vulnerable links in our economic system and creates inter-generational inequity.

All three levels of government need to be focussed on working together to help increase the supply of housing by reducing the impact of regulations which limit supply and create delays. In the context of Abundance, this can be done through tied grants from the commonwealth to state and local governments for removing regulations and hitting supply targets.

Though Klein and Thompson make a compelling effort at articulating the challenges of housing development, they are less detailed on how to strike the balance between regulations that are purposed with good intentions and the need to build with speed and at low cost. In part, this is due to the localised nature of regulatory systems which means Abundance is necessarily limited to principles.

In Australia, the YIMBY movement has demonstrated that balance by shining a light on the heritage movement which broadens its core purpose to a suffocating level that

unduly limits a homeowner's ability to improve their homes and restricts supply beyond the worthwhile objective of recognising architectural heritage.

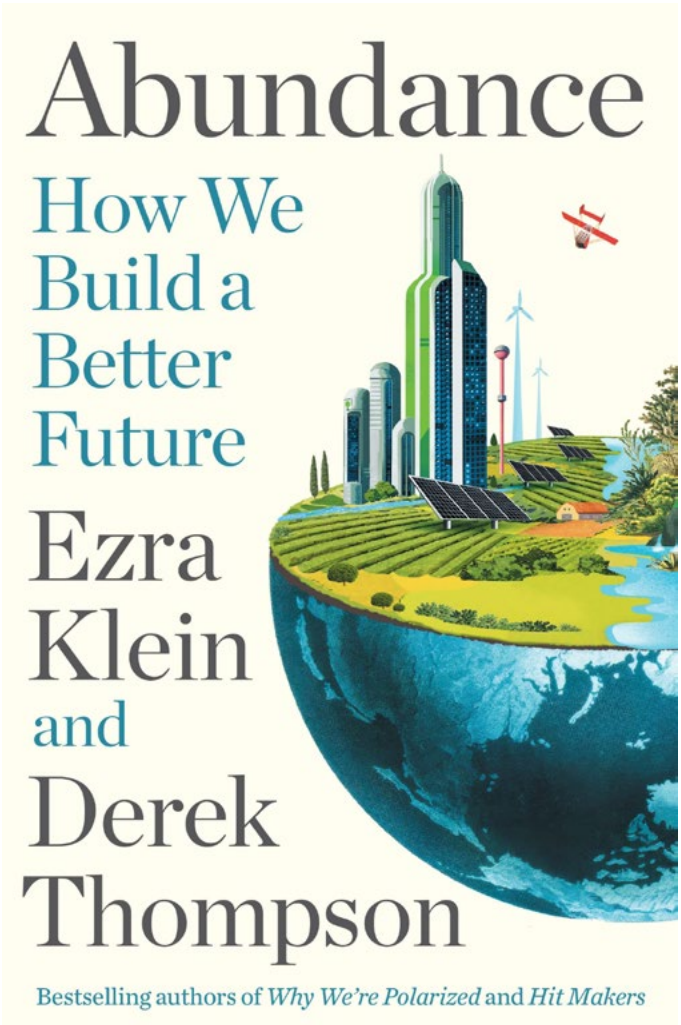
On the energy front, technological innovation is essential for emissions abatement to hit net zero. To continue spurring the innovations required to fully move away from fossil fuels, we need to financial incentivise targeted problem solving into the biggest roadblocks, such as the emissions intensity of concrete.

In striving for ambitious and complex outcomes, we need to be mindful of the Tinbergen rule – to achieve each policy goal, you need at least one independent policy instrument (regulatory or financial). If there are too many goals and not enough instruments, we will not achieve the goal. In my professional field of electric vehicles, we need to consider which instruments are required to increase the supply of EVs and which instruments are required to spur demand. While there is one overarching goal – the increased uptake of electric cars, trucks and busses – we need to clearly identify how each instrument is solving for a market or government failure in the EV supply chain. In this regard, Abundance argues for the provision of more zero emission transport, and it is up to each policy maker to implement that balance of regulation and community good.

It must be clarified that supply side progressivism is not code for deregulation. Pointedly, regulations or interests that spur anti-competitive behaviour and prevent the supply of essential goods – be they groceries or medicines – need to be tackled. This is especially pertinent in Australia with our economy tending to natural monopolies and oligopolies in key industries.

We should welcome Abundance into Australia's policy debate and supply side progressivism as a prism for improving the material lives of Australians. Heeding the call of Marianna Mazzacuto's mission economy, we should identify which essential goods need to be provided more abundantly and then discuss which regulations, institutions or interests are impeding or enabling those outcomes. With the prospect of many years in government ahead for federal Labor and several state Labor governments, our many representatives should approach their task with a welcoming embrace of Abundance to deliver for their communities.

Aman Gaur is Vice-President of the Footscray ALP branch and Assistant Secretary of Victorian Multicultural Labor. He works in the electric vehicle industry.



Thumbs Up, Craggy

David Keith Cragg, 16.09.1957 -17.03.2025

David Cragg who passed away in March was a Labor scholar, policy wonk, ceaseless advocate for a fair go, Victorian union leader suspicious of utopians, who realised gradual improvements, aggregated, lifted people up, a Christian who knew fallen angels were on earth, had a mindset appreciative of the eternal as well as the ephemeral. All those things made him whole.

After university came long periods working in the labour movement. He came to know Laurie Short, the Sydney-based Federated Ironworkers Association (FIA) leader. He befriended numerous other union leaders, nearly everyone significant in Victoria. He wanted to appreciate the life journeys of others. Mike O'Sullivan from the Federated Clerks, then the Australian Services Union, was influential.

David felt the calling for union work and thought if he was going to be effective, he should get his hands dirty. Hence this bespectacled and bookish-looking man clocked-on at Titan Nails in Port Melbourne, a BHP Steel site. He joined the FIA. In 1986, he stood for and won election as a rank-and-file organiser. His leadership and negotiation skills were honed at workshop meetings, hearings before the industrial tribunals, direct bargaining with employers, and mass meetings of members. Workplace health and safety, workers compensation particularly interested him. But the FIA went through hard times, the steel industry shed thousands of jobs – and so too did the union. Thereafter, he helped organise Labor Senator Robert Ray's office in Nunawading, including serving on ministerial staff, then he returned to union work. The FIA merged into the Australian Workers Union (AWU), where Cragg served as an official to 2009; then came nearly a decade as the elected

Assistant Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, to "retirement" in 2018. Though someone this restless and energetic could never do nothing.

David was always in conversation with the past, his tours of gravesides of Labor heroes, his dedication to the heritage listing and renewal of the Victorian Trades Hall, his fiery though erudite speeches commemorating Eureka at Ballarat, spoke to that. Every time, there was an edge. He looked forward. He was a labour historian, sagely interpreting our world, referencing past lives for the continuing relevance of their example. He had unfrightened sympathy for the underdog.

He was the son of Keith Wadeson Cragg (1916-1991), engineer, originally from Subiaco, in Western Australia, and Mary Elizabeth, nee Allen (1920-2006), from Tocumwal in the Riverina, near the banks of the Murray River, on the Victorian-NSW border. The couple had Robert (1948), Elspeth (1951) and, as David said, "a late surprise" when he came along in 1957.

His father was highly intelligent (dux of Perth Modern), a Major in the Royal Australian Army Ordinance Corp, who met his future wife in Tocumwal in that short period when it hosted a US Airforce base. Keith attended Army Staff College in England after the war; then returned to Australia in the early 1950s. His world involved munitions, armaments, controlled disposals. At Crystal Brook near Gladstone, South Australia, David was born. Finally settling in Loch Street, Camberwell, Melbourne, the Craggs presented as a comfortable bourgeois family with a mixture of 'arty' and 'traditional' tastes. They were romantic lefties who read voraciously. Family lore says that ASIO's Brigadier Spry had files that stymied the father's career (though this is doubtful). Mum was educated to leaving level at PLC Melbourne.

His mother came from the country, a spot where there was two of everything; two butchers, the Catholic one and the Protestants'. Young David had a Melbourne Presbyterian's suspicion of Papists. A Sunday School teacher vividly imprinted an image of over-reaching Romanish tentacles. His folk were more freethinking. In his secondary years, David attended the Anglicans' Trinity Grammar school in Melbourne. He was always going to be somebody.

At Melbourne University he grew up, emerging from a world of pleasant comforts to understand and confront the world. He appreciated French philosopher René Descartes' quip: "Conquer yourself rather than the world". That message he partly heeded. But with the more ambitious point, he knew understanding yourself should not go to waste.

The adult Cragg was already clearly discernible in the tall, geeky teenager at Melbourne University, sporting tan-brown corduroy jackets (the leather patches at the worn elbows came later), stovepipe blue jeans, serious look, smoky fingers (he liked a puff), pitch black rim glasses, looking like he had arrived from a French saloon after a smart joust with Sartre.

Gough was great; though he learnt Labor heroes too have flaws. Bob Santamaria's activists and the Comms were active on campus. He knew what he was against, but curiosity led him to wonder why others thought the way they did. He read about Marx, Catholic thinkers, Fabianism, labour history, and Trotskyism (a close relative was carried away by that cult). What a mixed bag it all was. At Melbourne University he came under the influence of Michael Danby and other Jewish students. He was forging himself as a social democrat, respectful of other traditions, sympathetic to the meliorists and civilisers in Labor rather than the big-talking radicals. He read and read. His conscience was his guide. He always had Israel's back in ALP debates. A moral toughness of unflinching fibre went with an appreciation of others thinking. On societal progress, David saw that most social change happens through gradual trends. The creative, cumulative process of small victories mattered more than any loud talk.

Aged 20, Victorian Young Labor's whirlwind President, the then Mary Alexander, got her troops, including David, to attend Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Francis' in the city. (This was the church where leading ALP politician Arthur Calwell usually prayed after the 1955 ALP Split – a point Cragg relished.) David survived the experience, loved the tradition, liking Catholics – a habit he continued.

No man was ever more determined to live, seek entertainment and life's joys, as David's body quarrelled with the looming likeness of death. He liked craft beers and blood-red Shiraz. Never brand conscious, labels were secondary to the taste. Over a decade ago, heart problems slowed him down. Stents and bypasses kept him alive. Recently, emphysema wracked and tore at his lungs. All of those in gasping confrontation claimed him in the end. After one operation, he joked "it only hurts when I move." A year ago, across the deep south in America, he went in search of rhythm and blues music and song and grog, from Louisiana to Tennessee, hillbilly country. A friend from uni days asked:

"Are you well enough to travel?" Cragg shot back: "That's the point.". He hated flying. But he needed to feel, see, taste where the music he loved came from. Freedom is a love affair with being human.

Friendships and loyalty were everything. After a close friend, Geoff Coxson, died David kept in touch with the widow and her children, even attending school graduations as if an affectionate uncle. Hundreds thought their friendship was meaningful, personal, and privileged. True. He kept friends close. One blessing of death is that you can now ignore what people say about you. But not in this case. You wish he knew how much he was loved. How much he is missed. On social media, in conversations, emails and telephone calls, they group and reminiscence about the man. Why? The worlds of others were touched by him. He made an impact, bringing the past alive, the present more interesting.

That wonderful, daft smile of his went up in mischief. Vividly in mind's eye you see those thumbs up gestures, toasts, and his warm generous sayings delivered in a deep, distinctive voice: "Good on you!"; "Bless your heart!"; "Fight the good fight!"; "Do svidaniya!" (Russian, "until we meet again"); "Bless you"; he loved to "have a natter"; and "hasta luego" (Spanish, "see you later").

It is a great thing to be so nice a person. Nice means pleasant, considerate, gentle. He was never weak, though. He entered battles to win, not to retreat. He hated defeat. He set out to convince, persuade, cajole. You can appreciate an opponent, understand where they are coming from, and still have a ruthlessness born of conviction. David Cragg was nicest when standing for something he believed in. He wanted to win you over. I am not sure that he had any enemies, which is rare for someone with sharp opinions, to be fondly regarded by all regardless of tribal allegiance.

His articles are a concatenation of people and events and the times in which they existed, about how things came to be. Years later, he wrote excoriatingly on the crimes of Soviet communism. With his friend Senator Kimberley Kitching, he got the powers-that-be in the party to back the Magnitsky legislation to sanction dictators and their enabling friends.

Many of his reviews and short pieces on aspects of labour history sparkled with insight and grace. For example, his review a couple of years back in the Australian Fabian journal on the memoirs of Max Ogden, the ex-communist and retired metalworker, is one of the most sober and insightful I've read on modern Labor, Australian unionism, and on opportunities gained and missed.

Published the day after he died in the Recorder, the labour history newsletter, was David's review of Nick Dyrenfurth's and Frank Bongiorno's A Little History of the Australian Labor Party. Cragg wrote that the authors had shown that the ALP is "capable of adapting in different times and handling unforeseen challenges and external shocks. It has endured, and will continue to do so, because there are things in life worth fighting for." Those things animated David, too. One hopes his essays might one day be collected because what he wrote was important.

"Death, where is thy sting?" David Cragg lives on – in our minds and memories. Anyone who fights for what he believed, ensures his ideals never die.

Dr Michael Easson AM is a Life member of the ALP, Executive Chair of EG Funds Management, and Labor historian, and a JCRC Advisory Council Member.

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