

# The Electorate Steps Left, the ALP Steps Right: An overview of the Australian 2022 federal election

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### Uniqueness of the 2022 election

The 2022 Australian federal election was marked by the public's insistence on change. At the most obvious level, this entailed a demand that there be a change of government. But in several ways the election marks a clear difference from other change-of-government elections. For instance, 2022 saw a challenge to the conventional wisdom that when the Australian public changes the government, it does so on a large scale. In an electoral system that favours major parties in a two-party alignment, the remarkable feature of 2022 is that the 5.74 per cent swing of the primary vote away from the Liberal and National Party Coalition — a swing normally enough for an emphatic victory in terms of seats — saw the Australian Labor Party (ALP) clamber to a bare majority. It garnered just short of a third of the primary vote, lower than the combined ALP-and-'Lang-Labor' vote of either the 1931 or 1934 election, and the lowest vote of any party forming a government in the history of the Federation. Notwithstanding the degree of strategic voting by Labor supporters in key seats directing their first preferences elsewhere, the ALP's low primary vote has been endemic to six of the last seven elections and underpins a trend that was set in train from the 1980s.

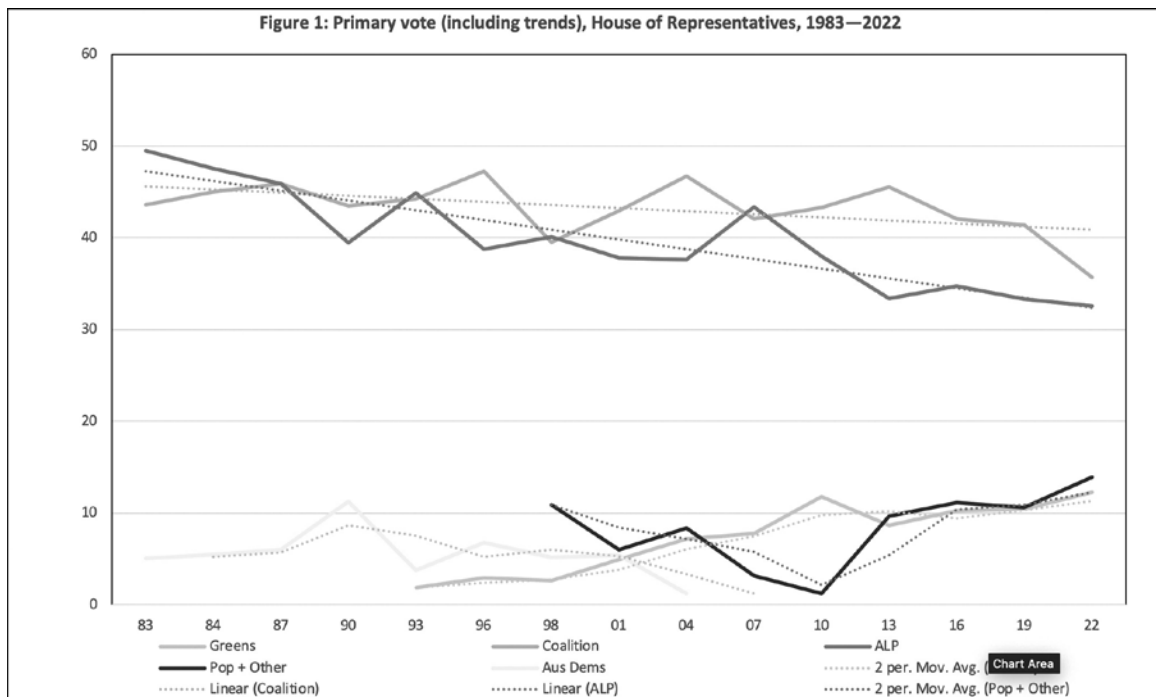
Meanwhile the rise of the greenish-blue 'teal' independents in former blue-ribbon Liberal seats filled a vacuum created by the Coalition's long-term rejection of climate science, the persistent refusal to establish a federal public integrity (or anti-corruption) body, and its hostility to gender equality and matters concerning the treatment of minorities more generally. In capturing six formerly safe Liberal seats in the House of Representatives — all of them by women — the teals gained financial help to sustain their already healthy grassroots campaign. Amy Nethery's analysis in this special issue points to how the teals obtained funding from Climate 200, an organisation of fledgling status in 2019, which by 2022 was able to ensure that the branch supporters of incumbent Liberals were outrun by teal foot soldiers.

In that context, the success of the Greens, seen in the party's snatching of three metropolitan Brisbane seats — one formerly marginal Labor seat (Griffith), one marginal Liberal seat (Brisbane), and one fairly safe Liberal seat (Ryan) — together with the close-run contests the party

mounted elsewhere, was also remarkable given the lack of access the Greens had to Climate 200 funds and ready-made constituencies. Narelle Miragliotta and Alasdair McCallum's analysis shows how two-party-preferred (2PP) majorities were built by the Greens in three seats and the conditions in which twelve Greens were elected to the Senate, one short of holding the balance of power. There seems no exaggeration in claiming the progressive move of the 2022 election reverberated across the electorate: no incumbent lost to someone from his or her right flank. It built on a swing away from the Liberal Party to the ALP and the Greens in affluent seats in 2019. Tellingly, in 2022 the swing *already discernible in 2019* bypassed the ALP to draw further away to the Greens and the teals. And as the electorate shifted left in 2022, the Coalition ranks have reconfigured to leave the Liberal Party, for the first time since its formation, with a minority of the Coalition's seats in the House of Representatives — 27 of 58, and the Coalition 19 short of a majority. The 2022 election is not so much a story of an ALP victory as it is the vanquishing of the Liberal Party. In Graham Maddox's contribution to this special issue, we see the extraordinary nature of Scott Morrison's religion and politics — and we might well wonder how deep the malaise of Australian politics is that delivered such a set of conditions.

That one third of Australian voters turned away from the major parties in casting their primary vote, and yet two thirds voted for a change of government, makes the 2022 election like no other since the establishment of the two-party alignment in 1910. In 2019 a gender gap was already significant — a 10-percentage-point gap in male-to-female support for the Liberal Party and a 6-percentage-point variance in female-to-male support for the Greens (Cameron and McAllister 2019) — and although 2022 saw the gap close to 38:32 in the case of male-to-female support for the Coalition, the gap opened further in female support for the ALP and the Greens, and male support for 'other' (Cameron et al. 2022: 21). All these outcomes accompanied the fact that the parliament elected in 2022 comprises much cultural diversity, including, crucially, 11 Indigenous Australians, a number finally proportional to the population of First Nations peoples, 234 years after dispossession.

In this special issue of *Social Alternatives*, we explore the theme of the electoral and political circumstances



'Pop + Other' = Populist parties (Hanson/One Nation, Palmer/UAP, & Katter) combined with Other (excluding independents). **Source: Australian Electoral Commission**

of the 2022 election and what these circumstances may suggest about the foreseeable future. The proper context of such analysis, of course, requires consideration of the degree of continuity as well. Elections are not everything, and the shift of power that the election suggests may be illusory, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on wider and deeper political conditions and the preparedness of political actors to shape those conditions.

#### What is the likely stance of the ALP government?

To take the most obvious determinant of what the election might mean in terms of change, a nominal social-democratic party has been elected to government at a time when many social-democratic parties, including the ALP, have largely discarded social democracy. Normally such a statement in an academic journal would be accompanied by substantial argument. Yet several scholars have attested, first, to a retreat of social democracy (Glyn 2001) and, more recently, to the existence of a post social-democratic era (Judt 2010; Mair 2013; Blyth 2015; Manwaring and Kennedy 2018; Manwaring 2021; Sassoon 2021; Moschonas 2022), while others have written specifically about the ALP in such terms (see for example Scott 2000; Quiggin 2001; Johnson 2011, 2018, 2019; Battin 2017). What a post-social-democratic landscape means for Australian politics is an important question both in terms of understanding the 2022 election results and in determining reasonable suppositions about the foreseeable future of the Australian polity.

First, the term 'post social democracy' is defined, and associated concepts are outlined. Post social democracy

is the condition in which (one-time) major political parties whose shared history has been concerned with advancing social democracy have come to accept the main tenets of neoliberalism, and, consciously or not, adopted a stance substantially inconsistent with (and in some instances hostile to) the aims of social democracy. Broadly, social democracy is an emancipatory project aiming to extend democracy from the political sphere to the social and economic realm by achieving greater equality, increasingly subjecting markets to socially determined outcomes, building distributive and redistributive institutions, and generally intervening in the economy to decommodify production and exchange as much as possible. Conversely, for the purposes of this discussion, neoliberalism may be defined as a political project to halt or reverse the historical accomplishments made by citizens and workers (Harvey 2005) occurring under the broad rubric of social democracy.

To the extent that (declared) proponents of neoliberalism achieve success in halting or reversing social democratic initiatives, they rely on, at least in part, the timidity of nominally social democratic political agents. The hegemony of neoliberal dictates is obviously a fundamental reason for the persistence of neoliberal policies. Less obvious, but more important, is the extent to which a party such as the ALP propagates ideas that are inimical to social democracy.

One reliable basis for predicting how the Albanese ALP government will approach its term in office may well be how the parliamentary ALP approached the 2022

election, especially in the context of its reaction to the shock result of 2019; another reasonable predictive basis is the ALP's record when last in government (2007 to 2013), but, for reasons of space, the latter will only be touched on here (for a discussion, see Battin 2017). Worth analysing at some length is how the ALP frames its stance towards power in the context of neoliberalism, or how it allows its stance to be framed.

### **The ALP's preference for minimal policy differentiation in 2022**

The ALP's justification for its low differentiation of policy, or so-called 'small-target' stance, in 2022 was based generally on claims about past elections and, specifically, its reading of voters' preferences at the 2019 election. With regard to using past elections as justification, proponents of the small-target approach associated high policy exposure and differentiation with electoral loss, but in fact were reduced to citing 2019 as the sole example of such association. While in opposition, strategies of significant differentiation and detailed policy that met with a marked *increase* in the ALP vote (1969, 1972, 1980, 1983, and 1998) were ignored, along with small-target *failures* of the past (2001 and 2004), leaving 2007, insofar as the ALP almost matched expensive tax cuts, as needlessly small-target. 1983 saw a reasonably ambitious social democratic platform scaled back *after* the election. And, contrary to re-written history, 2004 was an election of low policy differentiation — apart from the ALP's redistributive policy on schools funding (which, again contrary to re-written history, and as polls demonstrated, was supported by the public (Ashbolt 2006; Browne 2012)).

Following 2019, in terms of the electorate's opinion of the unpopular ALP leader (scoring him 4 out of 10, the second lowest up to that point), and how its significance might be gauged once Bill Shorten was no longer leader, consideration of the implications was shut down by the sheer force of party officials' scapegoating the ALP's policies. In other words, what weight should have been given to Shorten's unpopularity as opposed to the ALP's 2019 policy suite was squashed as a question by conflating the two. And whether another Coalition campaign of lies could be effective in 2022 was never considered. In 2022 Scott Morrison's score of 3.6, the lowest on record, was a critical factor in the 2022 result. Martin Drum's commentary piece, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, draws our attention to the vital role of voters' perceptions of a leader's competence.

Coming back to the ALP, in the rare media critiques of Labor's small-target approach to the election (Carney 2022), criticism fell into categories of (i) mistaken history, where it was pointed out that clear policy differentiation

brought electoral success for the ALP in the past; (ii) risk of self-defeat, where voters might decline to support a party not offering sufficient clarity about change; and/or (iii) a Pyrrhic victory, winning the election but without a mandate to govern beyond a restrictive sphere. Such criticisms were usually accompanied by the related observation that the ALP misinterpreted the result of 2019 as outright rejection of progressive policies (Gittins 2019) and that, erroneously, it was looking to extend its electoral prospects by making its policies more conservative. There is considerable merit in each of these criticisms, but an additional, more fundamental reason for the ALP's stance in the lead-up to the election of 2022 may not have been primarily *electoral* but *ideological*: the parliamentary party is presently so deeply imbued with neoliberal ideas that the claimed electoral constraints were not its principal reason for adopting the approach of minimising policy contest. In other words, although the ALP attempted to justify its stance towards the 2022 election largely in electoral terms — what was considered possible in Australia's set of electoral conditions, and from the vantage point of opposition — the 'small-target' tactic may be more accurately considered a cover for producing an ideological shift further away from social democratic possibility. (Put bluntly, the ALP's position bears some similarity to former British prime minister Tony Blair's comment in the 2015 British Labour Party leadership ballot that even if Labour could achieve electoral victory by undertaking to reverse the effects of neoliberalism, he 'wouldn't want it'.)

### **Depoliticisation as an interpretive device**

Precisely knowing a political organisation's priority of motives is a difficult task, but we do have the official statements of the party organisation as a guide. After the 2019 loss, the ALP's review of the election campaign was remarkable for its politically insipid language:

Labor should adopt the language of inclusion, recognising the contribution of small and large businesses to economic prosperity, and abandon derogatory references to "the big end of town". Labor's policy formulation should be guided by the national interest, avoiding any perception of capture by special interest groups (Emerson and Weatherill n.d.: 8).

To interpret this language and the approach the ALP took to the 2022 election, it is useful to utilise the concept of depoliticisation. Peter Burnham, credited with initiating debate about depoliticisation in the context of Blair's Labour in Britain, defines depoliticisation 'as a process whereby state managers may seek to place at one remove the politically contested character of governing and in so doing paradoxically enhance political control'

(Burnham 2001: 128). A broader definition, but one which is consistent with Burnham, is the attempt or the act of erasing or obscuring the political character of a decision or activity, when, for normatively stated reasons, it is desirable that its political character is retained and made explicit.

Depoliticisation — of discourse as much as in policymaking — was always a necessary tool of the neoliberal project, insofar as its proponents saw the task as presenting their propositions as incontestable. In terms of discourse, the concept of depoliticisation offers an understanding at the level of everyday, nonsensical language such as ‘class warfare’ or ‘the politics of envy’, directed at individuals and groups seeking to revive debate about distribution and redistribution, the terms of traditional politics. It can help to explain Albanese’s coining of the term ‘conflict fatigue’, a signal that the government he leads will not seek to contest existing provisions if doing so will endanger electoral survival. Returning to the words of the ALP review cited above, we see that the implications of depoliticisation involve paradox, insofar as withdrawing from contestation over matters that are inherently political is itself a political act. To be fair to Emerson and Weatherill, their report contains more nuance than the above quote would indicate, pointing for instance to the belatedly announced and frenzied-spending aspects of the 2019 campaign. But the deeper political effect of their report was that the ALP would not redress the existing imbalance of power held by various groups; rather, depoliticisation results in an acquiescence to those groups advantaged by current arrangements.

Depoliticisation — again paradoxically — can also explain how the terms of historicopolitical debate are shaped. When Australia and comparable countries were debating the effect of neoliberal austerity policies in the wake of the global economic crisis, former Treasurer Wayne Swan attempted to repudiate the notion that the ALP under Hawke and Keating commenced the neoliberal project or that stances adopted by Hawke and Keating were mistaken:

Paul Keating himself has wisely observed that ‘[neo]liberal economics has run into a dead end and has no answer to the contemporary malaise.’ This is not, repeat not, a repudiation of the reforms he implemented as Treasurer and continued as Prime Minister. Rather, it is simply an acknowledgement that different challenges require different solutions (Swan 2017).

To make sense of Swan’s position we require context and background. Keating’s remark was not the only

point of appraisal with which Swan was concerned. At the time of Swan’s defence of the broad framework of economic policy from the 1980s to the mid-1990s and from 2007 to 2013 — what he calls ‘laborism’ — debate was heightened and some of that debate contained implicit or explicit criticism of the programmatic direction undertaken by Hawke and Keating, later not reversed by Rudd and Gillard. Rather than conceding the point that Labor’s later stance in government (2007-2013) saw a variation of the neoliberalism that would otherwise have been administered under the Coalition — arguably, a significant variation (such as that seen in Australia’s initial management of the global economic crisis) containing some progressive features (Battin 2017) — Swan changes the terms of debate by taking the focus away from social democratic criteria to create another category. In this context ‘laborism’ is not neoliberalism and cannot even be compared to neoliberalism; rather, laborism responds to the ‘challenges’ of the times. This subjectivist technique is needed to avoid reference to constants or objective measurement, such as acknowledging and addressing inequality (ironically, a matter he has addressed (Swan 2005)), the level of public provision versus privatisation, the significance of achieving and maintaining secure and appropriately remunerated employment through strong trade unions, or any of the other criteria that distinguish social democracy from neoliberalism. An examination based on these criteria would scarcely lead to an endorsement of policies followed from the days of Hawke and Keating.

One question is why so much effort is expended on developing arguments like Swan’s. After all, Swan was addressing a *progressive* audience, which substantially accepts his adept handling of the crisis that unfolded in 2008, not to a right-wing audience. It cannot be, therefore, that he is seeking credit hitherto denied or that he is settling a score with the ALP’s opponents to its right. The answer is that Swan (correctly) sees that there is a lot at stake in terms of the future, and the role of ideas in that future. The fight is intensely ideological because, at moments of fierce public debate about the direction of economic policy (e.g. Denniss 2018), such as the period of austerity in which Swan published his view, space opens up to change direction, and for the ALP to assume a role in being part of that change — or to close it down by attempting to recruit more progressives to the neoliberal framework. (Hawke and Keating’s insistence that the ALP was somehow economically incompetent until they arrived was at the heart of its acquiescence to economic orthodoxy and the broader neoliberalism to follow (see Hawke’s claims and admissions in Hawke 1994: 153, 174, 235).)

Other ALP figures play their role in this ideological design. Former ALP minister in the Rudd and Gillard

era, Craig Emerson, co-author of the ALP's review of the 2019 election and now writing for the *Australian Financial Review*, and who in the 1980s advised ALP ministers supporting the changes made by the Hawke government, has made a case for the 'consensus' style of government espoused by Albanese so that the ALP might come to be entrenched as 'the natural party of government' (Emerson 2022). The remarkable aspect of this appeal is that it all has been implored before (for a critique of which see Maddox 1989). It was claimed in the 1980s that Hawke's electoral success would set up the ALP for a long period of healthy majorities which would see Labor's policies accepted by the electorate and, over time, embedded. The consequence for the Coalition, it was asserted, was that it would be pushed so far to the right it would be unelectable. Instead, Labor's period in office, with the exception of the 1993 election, was associated with a decline both in its primary vote and 2PP support. Despite the re-introduction of universal health care, electoral reform, sex discrimination legislation, selected environmental protection, and some other worthy policies, the period was marked by a systemic departure from social democracy and the inauguration of neoliberalism (Stretton 1993; Langmore and Quiggin 1994; Battin 1997; Mathews and Grewal 1997). In terms of the political effect that Hawke and Keating's directional turn had on the Coalition, far from making it unelectable, it ushered in the Coalition's second-longest period of government (1996-2007) since the formation of the Liberal Party.

This background is relevant to contemporary circumstances because the official ALP view on the path to electoral victory in 2022, and what a victory would offer in the foreseeable future, bears resemblance to those views of the early-1980s ALP camarilla about the 'natural party of government'. But there is one fundamental difference between the settings faced by two ALP governments elected nearly 40 years apart. As much as Hawke's 'consensus' style can be and was criticised for the same reason many would now question Albanese's approach — that it signified retreat from political contest (against Coalition and business interests) over matters economic and industrial — Hawke and Keating at least had the benefit of extensive institutional strength.

By 1983, even though the ALP had governed federally for only one quarter of the previous 40 years, the achievements of the labour movement and social democracy were considerable. Although the 30-year period of full employment frayed at the edges in the mid-'70s recession and came under greater strain in the wake of the deeper recession of the early 1980s, the residual effects of secure, permanent employment with union-sanctioned conditions were still dominant. Fully half the working population belonged to a union. The

personal income tax system was decidedly progressive, the public sector robust (although smaller than the OECD average), and public enterprises could lay claim to keeping the private sector honest through extra-market criteria. Manufacturing was still providing one in five jobs. Wages were growing and the working week was shrinking. The balance of capital-labour forces was such that the inflation of the period was hurting capital at least as much as it was workers. The share of income going to the richest one per cent was limited to 4.5 per cent. Whitlam had made the welfare system more universalist and relatively generous for an Anglosphere system, which, apart from the dismantling of Medibank, Fraser did not change in any significant way. The universities, funded by government to provide free tuition, were the envy of the English-speaking world.

Forty years later, except for Medicare, which in any case is much diminished, all these achievements lie in ruins. Albanese cannot operate from a position of social democratic strength. Where Hawke posed as the great conciliator, purporting to seek common ground, but in fact increasingly traded away the accomplishments of the past, Albanese is in no such place. It begs the question as to what benefit he thinks the business sector would discern in a truce with the ALP when organised labour has been defeated and citizens worn down. The answer may be, as Guy Rundle has suggested, that Albanese is functioning on a belief that business, or part of business, may prefer a more stable and consistently administered capitalism, delivered by the ALP, to the crony capitalism which is now the hallmark of the Coalition (Rundle 2022a, 2022b). (In this respect, the loop back to Mark Latham's position in 2003 and 2004 is complete (Latham 2003).) Individual business spokespeople acknowledge capitalism's problems, most importantly its labour and skills shortages (to be addressed by migration), low productivity growth, specific infrastructure needs and overall investment, and some appear to have made a judgement that Albanese's ALP is a better prospect in managing these problems. When the greater certainty the ALP promises to bring to climate policy is added to the mix, business' choice becomes even clearer.

One problem that will be faced by the ALP government, which will become increasingly apparent, is the extent to which it will be able to satisfy progressivist expectations at the same time as it does little or nothing to undo the neoliberal framework, or indeed as it strengthens that framework. The term 'progressivist' denotes a disposition to address specific instances of inequity as they arise within a neoliberal structure, rather than to challenge the logic of that structure, since that logic has been accepted. At the September 2022 'Jobs and Skills Summit' held by the Albanese government, for example, the government reiterated its existing election

pledge to increase substantially the wages in the female-dominated aged-care sector (on the proviso that the industrial tribunal hands down a decision to increase wages in the sector). The systemic causes of low wages in various sectors are not identified, let alone addressed. Within progressivism, specific instances of inequity will sometimes be attended to (aged-care and (perhaps) child-care wages), but the systemic drivers of inequality, and therefore the demands to which inequity gives rise, will remain in place. Satisfying electoral expectations within the ALP's progressivist constituency, then, seems enough of a problem without considering the stultifying effects of an eradicated political economy.

At the expense of losing supporters to its left, the ALP's approach to the 2022 election clearly was based on attracting support from those who had voted for the Coalition in 2019. But here is another critical point: it did so *not* by explaining more effectively the reasons for change — by shaping opinion rather than being shaped by it — or even by reordering the policy priorities of 2019, but by narrowing the possibility of change. In Albanese's own words:

My job isn't to get people who are already going to vote for me, and who voted Labor in 2019, to get their pen and mark the one with more intensity. My job is to get [enough] people who didn't vote Labor, ... an additional ... million people, to do that (Albanese quoted in Bryant 2022).

That Albanese failed on his own terms — achieving a negative swing (0.76%) in the primary vote — is not so much the point. And an appeal to swinging voters is not itself necessarily to blame for excessively narrowing the potential for change, for such an appeal must be made in any election. The important point is that the minimisation of policy differentiation comes from the ALP's assumptions about swinging voters' preferences, which are assumptions about *some* swinging voters. Swinging voters do not make their choice through a coherent discernment of their interests or a consistent philosophical outlook. This suggests the group is neither an untapped reservoir of ready-made left votes nor a grasping and unmovable group to which a nominally left party must bow. Sorting out which views could be accommodated to a social democratic program can be done, and potential supporters engaged, although such a task would absorb an enormous amount of time of activists in a social movement. However, an engaged membership is exactly what the ALP has abandoned increasingly since the 1980s. (Even though democratic participation has been spurned by the ALP machine, members still deliver a more-than-deserved activism on rare occasions, as shown in the elections of 1993

and 2007, which featured community engagement and resulted in an increase of electoral reach.) Leaving aside the challenges facing a party that does not have the high level of member activism needed to identify and then engage voters outside a party's constituency, the overall rebuffing of those ALP members who do not support the Party's move to the right carries general problems of reduced motivation for day-to-day activism, even alienation and membership exit.

It is not as though empirical support does not exist for the sorts of contentions made here. Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley demonstrate how the decline of class voting in Britain is not the result of (an imagined) post-industrialised society and fluid class boundaries but rather the rightward shift of notionally left parties (Evans and Tilley 2011; 2012). Johannes Karreth and his colleagues have found empirical support for the idea that the rightward move of social democratic parties in the 1990s to cast the electoral net wider can meet with success, but only for a time (Karreth et al. 2012). After such a process, such parties are confronted with the problem they thought they faced before the policy shift, except the terms of policy debate have moved further from the grounds of social democratic potential.

Coming back to the immediacy of 2022, self-described 'progressive' media commentators (and other elites) encouraged the ALP, if it needed any encouragement at all, in adopting its so-called small-target approach, and, specifically, its accession to the Coalition's plan to eradicate the progressivity of the personal income tax scales. This, they said, was necessary for the ALP to win the election. The damage this would do to the revenue base and to social democratic possibility was either not considered or seen as unavoidable. Even though the strategy seems to be based on a belief that an insufficient number of voters can recognise that tax reduction for high-income groups has no economic logic, or that low- and middle-income voters are incapable of realising their own economic interests, or even recognising the obscenity of flat tax, one such progressivist now urges the Albanese government to consider seeking renewed electoral endorsement for (i) a tax system that at least restores any progressivity of the tax scales which will be lost after July 2024; and (ii) making the tax system generally more equitable, including adopting some of the ALP tax policies abandoned after 2019 (Lewis 2022). Such political dissonance characterises the neoliberal era.

### **The foreseeable future**

The argument of this overview of the 2022 election is that the fundamental problem confronting the ALP is that it has no distinctive political economy to convey to its

own constituency or to the electorate at large. Several years of depoliticisation have reduced it to practising 'politics without a project', to borrow a phrase. In an important respect, when the ALP was last in government, this situation was disguised by the global economic crisis, which, although unanticipated, partly reshaped a diminished politics by presenting the Rudd government with something to do in political economy terms. That the ALP could not achieve ongoing electoral success is attributable — apart from leadership frivolity, which itself stemmed from self-doubt and having no agenda — to its lack of preparedness to depart from neoliberal strictures and more specifically the rush to tighten fiscal policy from 2010 onwards. It reverted to arguing on the terms of its opponents.

In the present parliament the ALP will take up matters that affect workers if they affect business as well, such as skills shortages and selected infrastructure projects. It will position itself in between the Greens and the Coalition on emission reduction targets. And it will select certain progressivist causes to pursue, that is, causes that are primarily socio-cultural, rather than those that pertain to economic inequality. Tod Moore's discussion of populism in this volume underscores the importance of this point. (Whether the ALP has given sufficient thought to how parties of the right tend to benefit when the focus is primarily on cultural concerns (Spies 2013) seems as remote as ever.) Where economic or industrial inequity is recognised, it will be addressed on occasion but confined to an issue-by-issue basis, on gender equity for example. Decisions about policy differentiation will increasingly be based on (perceived) electoral expedience rather than principled representation. This is not to suggest that, on occasion, there will not be ground-breaking initiatives sponsored by the ALP government. As Thomas Mayor outlines in the interview about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament (this volume), there are times when a socio-cultural matter is of such consequence that its social justice implications are profound.

What the ALP's fundamental direction — progressivist but at the same time neoliberal — means for its prospects at the next election, therefore, depends even more than usual on how other political actors respond to it. To spell this out, the ALP seems unlikely to alter its course, and so if the Greens, for example, capitalise on Labor's weakness and win seats such as Richmond in NSW and Wills in Victoria, the ALP would already be looking at losing its majority. If the Coalition remains on its present path, as seems likely, but adopts a more nuanced stance on China, it may win back seats such as Tangney and Bennelong. Xiang Gao's contribution to this special issue highlights the importance, and the unusual circumstances, of the Chinese-Australian vote in 2022. Two or three seats with high numbers of

Chinese Australians coming back to the Coalition at the next election is a long way short of a Coalition majority, but, other things being equal, it would pull the ALP into minority government.

It has been well beyond the scope of this overview to examine comprehensively the problems of social democracy, a task performed by others (Johnson 2019; Manwaring 2021). Our task has been focused on the features of the 2022 election — many of them sanguine — in the gloomy context of social democracy's crisis and the ALP's apparent refusal to develop a political economic approach to governing. That neoliberalism is disintegrating at the level of policy, but is maintained at the level of ideology, is at the crux of the malaise of the Australian polity.

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## Author

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## Portraiture

Three portraits in a hallway. *Cat on a Windy Day*,  
a small rusty cat attacking whatever  
the dry leaves hold. How quickly things go:  
*Cat on a Slab at the Vet's*, the years our kids  
spent mewling and purring till we bought them  
a kitten. After they'd grown and gone out into the night

of separate lives, they'd come back to us  
when cash and kindness dwindled, talk absently,  
searching about for the cat. She remembered them,  
it seemed, as one thinks of a favourite film  
or the morning after love. Now she's a cross  
made from twigs. Our son's in London, daughter Melbourne.

Going to their rooms, I linger among the scents  
that remain there, the television yowling  
down the hall. I wander to the kitchen, look out  
into the yard, where the neighbours' cats hiss and snarl  
over empty ground. Wind scratches at the clouds,  
scrambles through leaves. *Man Alone at a Window, Rain Gathering*.

JOHN FOULCHER