

Australian election dominated by false promises and diversions

By Mike Head
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In its statement announcing the party's campaign for the May 18 federal election, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned: "To a greater extent than ever before, this election will be characterised by lies and diversions, as the parties of the political establishment, together with the corporate media, work to cover over the real situation facing working people."

It has taken little time for that prediction to be borne out. The first week of the official election campaign has been dominated by desperate efforts by the major parties to woo alienated voters with false promises and phony sympathy. At the same time, they have been signalling to big business their unswerving commitment to "fiscal responsibility," which means further slashing social spending.

The mudslinging from all sides, which began within minutes of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's announcement of the election date last Thursday, is to cover up the fact that there are no fundamental differences between any of these parties. They are all committed to an agenda of war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

On day one, 72 of the 101 ads pushed by the Liberal Party's Facebook account attacked Labor's so-called "taxes" on retirees, housing and cars. Labor's own "attack" ads said: "You can't trust the Liberals."

While travelling around the country, making promises pitched to selected constituencies, Morrison and Labor Party leader Bill Shorten accused each other of uncoded promises that would open up "black holes" in the budget. Each is trying to convince the corporate elite that he can produce bigger budget surpluses faster—at the expense of the social needs of working people.

Even the limited pledges being made by Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition to partially reverse the increasingly run-down state of public hospitals, schools, social housing and public transport are stretched out over

many years, making them meaningless. All of these pledges are conceived, not as the means of addressing pressing social problems, but at making a pitch to particular electorates and pockets of voters.

A prime example is Labor's pledge to spend \$2.3 billion over four years to reduce crippling out-of-pocket costs and long waiting lists for cancer sufferers. Feigning sympathy for cancer patients and their families, Labor leader Bill Shorten peddled the illusion that all treatments would become free.

In reality, Labor's plan would only marginally increase the rate of Medicare "bulk billing" by cancer specialists, still leaving patients having to raise thousands of dollars for life-saving treatment. And it would do nothing to address the wider issues of fees, waiting lists and lack of services throughout the chronically-underfunded public hospital and health system.

Having no policy of his own, Health Minister Greg Hunt inflated exaggerated Labor's promises and declared he had found another Labor "black hole." He released health department data estimating that eliminating out-of-pocket costs for all cancer-related procedures would cost \$6.8 billion over four years.

Both parties have presided over the systematic rundown of the health and hospital system and have no intention of spending the many billions required to provide free, high quality health care to all.

Such posturing and lies are only possible because none of it has been subjected to any critical analysis by the establishment media. Not a single press conference sees a challenge to the essential bipartisan unity. No journalist dares question the petty, contrived character of the so-called debate, which has nothing to do with the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of voters.

Nor has any examination been provided of the decades-long record of the entire political establishment. Successive governments, Coalition and Labor alike, have

enforced the dictates of the financial and corporate elite, making Australia one of the most unequal countries in the world. As a result, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population now owns as much as the poorest 70 percent.

Such is the obvious disconnect, however, between the official campaign and the worsening social reality, that some corporate think tanks and media commentators are sounding an alarm. Even the carefully staged-managed campaign appearances of Morrison and Shorten have been disrupted by people objecting that their promises cannot be trusted.

The business-backed Grattan Institute reported this week that only a quarter of people think “people in government can be trusted to do the right thing”—the lowest result since the survey began in 1969. That is only a superficial expression of the seething discontent that has built up over the past four decades.

Wednesday’s release of the Treasury’s Pre-Election Fiscal and Economic Outlook (PEFO) underscored the bogus character of the 10-year budget predictions on which both the Coalition and Labor have based their pledges. It made thinly-veiled references to the re-emerging global slump, trade war and military tensions and the collapse of the six-year housing bubble.

“As always there are a number of risks and uncertainties around the forecasts that continue to evolve,” the PEFO stated. Internationally, it referred to “a high degree of uncertainty” and a range of economic and geopolitical risks.” Domestically, it warned that housing prices could “fall further,” posing “a downside risk to the outlook for both dwelling investment and consumption.”

This is another warning, courtesy of the Treasury, that once the election is over, regardless of whether the Coalition or Labor, backed by the Greens, heads the next government, it will tear up its promises and impose a new round of austerity measures.

Equally revealing about the first week of the election campaign is what was not mentioned. For all the bogus rhetoric from both Labor and the Coalition of delivering a “fair go,” hardly a word was said about the bipartisan rejection of calls to increase the Newstart welfare allowance for jobless workers, which has been deliberately set at a sub-poverty rate to coerce the unemployed into cheap labour.

In a bid to head off widespread anger over Labor’s stance, Shorten affected sympathy for the jobless and again promised an unspecified “review,” just as he did at last December’s Labor Party national conference. To state the obvious, a review commits Labor to absolutely

nothing.

One issue has been very quickly buried, with the assistance of the corporate media—the refusal of both the government and Labor to defend WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. This is despite protests, petitions and demands for government intervention continuing to be raised by audience members at election events.

A virtual media blackout was imposed on the emergency rallies held by the SEP in Sydney and Melbourne to demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic and legal powers to secure Assange’s freedom, with a guarantee against extradition to the US, where he could be jailed for life, or even executed, on concocted conspiracy and espionage charges.

This line-up to reject the defence of a journalist and Australian citizen who has courageously exposed the war crimes and abuses of the US and its partners, including one Australian government after another, is a damning indictment. It is a demonstration of the readiness of the media and political establishment to overturn basic legal and democratic rights in order to suppress political dissent and demonstrate its unconditional commitment to Washington’s preparations for further wars, mass surveillance and regime-change operations.

As the SEP explains in its election statement, there is only one way to answer the attacks on social conditions, the evisceration of democratic rights and the drive to war. That is to take up the fight for a socialist program, that is, for the working class to establish a workers’ government to reorganise economic life on the basis of social need and equality, not corporate profit.

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