5

IDEOLOGY AND POPULISM

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The 2019 Australian federal election campaign offered voters a clear ideological choice. However, this was largely due to Labor's ambitious agenda that sought to address issues of rising inequality and to increase government revenue to fund government services and benefits. The Liberal Party's 'small target' strategy articulated its more neoliberal ideological position largely via critiquing Labor's tax and spending policies. The election campaign also displayed elements of both left-wing and right-wing populism, in which 'we the people' are mobilised against a perceived predatory enemy: 'them'. In a shift away from neoliberal ideological perspectives, Labor depicted itself as representing the people (particularly the working and middle classes) against the more economically privileged 'top end of town'. Scott Morrison took a more neoliberal populist position, mobilising the people against big government by depicting himself as an ordinary bloke trying to stop Labor from ripping off and spending taxpayers' money. Two minor right-wing parties displayed more fully blown populist agendas and were a significant source of preferences for the Coalition Government—namely, Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON) and Clive Palmer's United Australia Party (UAP).

Given that much of the Liberals' campaign was focused on critiquing Labor's economic policy, this discussion will begin with an analysis of Labor's position, before moving to an analysis of the Liberals' position as the major party in the Coalition. It will then analyse the populism exhibited by PHON and the UAP. I argue, contrary to Jan-Werner Müller (2016), that it is important to identify populist elements in mainstream politicians' discourse even if they do not exhibit the full-blown populism displayed by minor parties such as PHON and the UAP or by iconoclastic politicians such as Donald Trump in the United States.

Labor

Labor had been developing its policies, focusing on creating a more equal society, since well before the 2016 election, although the 2019 campaign saw some new policies added (see Chapters 13 and 20, this volume). Labor pledged to improve wages and conditions in a time of wage stagnation and rising economic inequality, to support racial, ethnic and same-sex equality and to raise revenue to better fund government services, including in child care, health and dental care and education. In these respects, Labor was espousing a relatively traditional Australian social-democratic ideological agenda, albeit one that emphasised providing a 'living wage' (Shorten 2019b) rather than providing a welfare state as extensive as in some European social democracies (Castles 1985). However, it was a post-Whitlamite and 21st-century version of that agenda that addressed a range of inequality issues wider than just those of class (see further Johnson 2019). For reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter, Labor's broader equality agenda did not become a major issue during the election in terms of the key debating points between the Liberals and Labor, although some anti-Labor forces did raise issues regarding Labor's support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) rights. Rather, the debate between the two major parties during the election campaign focused on critiquing Labor's tax policies, and those are what will be discussed in most detail in this chapter. Indeed, one of Labor's problems in the campaign was that it had difficulty framing the debate around its chosen issues, rather than ones highlighted by the Liberals.

Although some media commentators characterised Labor's tax policies as involving a radical move to the left, they were often merely winding back tax concessions and loopholes that had been introduced by the Howard Government during the heady days of the mining boom. For example, Howard had changed Keating-era legislation to provide franking credits to those who had not paid tax and had reduced Labor's capital gains tax. Similarly, the Hawke–Keating Government had originally tried to abolish negative gearing altogether before industry pressure made them reintroduce it. The real estate and housing industries also campaigned against Labor's negative gearing and capital gains tax changes in 2019 (see Wanna, Chapter 19, this volume).

Nonetheless, Labor's ideological position differed from that espoused during the Hawke and Keating years, despite both past Labor leaders' endorsement of Bill Shorten (Hawke and Keating 2019). Labor under Shorten did not emphasise the positive role of the market and private business in the way Hawke and Keating had. Rather, Shorten (2019b) focused on addressing issues of rising economic inequality. He argued 'that capital in this country is taxed very lightly, but income is taxed very heavily', which had major implications for ordinary Australians, from young people to pensioners (ABC 2019b). Meanwhile, Shorten stated that government spending benefited the privileged:

> When you say 'big spending', let's tell the truth here—this government is spending money. They spend it in tax cuts—$77 billion for the top tier of tax earners. They spent three years trying to give away $80 billion to the big end of town in corporate tax cuts. (ABC 2019c)

Shorten also argued that 'income has been redistributed from wages to profits' (quoted in Hartcher 2019). Labor emphasised the need to raise wages given wage stagnation and also the need to tackle the gender wage gap (NewCompany.com.au 2019b), including via government-funded wage subsidies in the female-dominated areas of early childhood education and care work. Labor's position on industrial relations also marked an ideological shift from the neoliberal-influenced Hawke and Keating years (as well as aspects of the Gillard years), particularly in regard to deficiencies in the existing enterprise bargaining regime and other rules constraining unions, including restrictions on pattern bargaining (see further Johnson 2019: 125–29). While Shorten claimed he would work with business, among others, in the spirit of Hawke and

Keating's accord (Shorten 2019a), he seemed to overlook the fact Hawke and Keating had offered business wage restraint initially (and later real wage cuts), subsidised by government spending on the social wage, and had also overseen a major transfer from wages to profits (see further Johnson 2019: 118–20). By contrast, Shorten tried to reframe the idea of what good economic management was, arguing: 'This government loves to talk about a strong economy but strong for who? Corporate profits are up 39 per cent but wages are only up 5 per cent' (ABC 2019b). However, Shorten argued on a number of occasions that increasing wages would be good for the economy because 'more money in the pockets of wage-earners, means more trade for shops in the high street and more confidence across the board. That is what we call a win-win, good for business, good for workers, and good for Australia' (Shorten 2019b).

Nonetheless, as in the 2016 election campaign (see Johnson 2016: 63–64, 73) and despite increased attempts to talk to business leaders (see Chapter 19, this volume), in 2019, Labor arguably did not make a frequent enough case that its policies would benefit both labour and at least some key sections of capital. Yet, that argument had long been a central part of Labor's traditional social harmony ideology (see further Johnson 1989: 4, 24, 102), helping make their case for Labor being better economic managers of a capitalist economy than the Liberals. Such issues pose a challenge for reforming social-democratic governments because they can be important to the many voters whose jobs and incomes are dependent on private sector investment. Yet, once again, in partially moving beyond its neoliberal positions of the 1980s and 1990s, Labor seemed to have forgotten how it had previously nuanced its economic management arguments. While previous Labor governments had sometimes evoked populist arguments to target particular sections of capital—for example, the banks under Ben Chifley or the multinationals under Gough Whitlam—generally they had argued that their policies would benefit both the economy as a whole and other key sections of capital, for example, the Australian manufacturing industry (Love 1984: 165–81; Johnson 1989: 21–26, 55–62).

Furthermore, Labor also failed to make a strong case during the election campaign for the economic management credentials of previous Labor governments. Instead, Labor tended to rely on its argument that it had made the tough revenue-raising decisions that would produce bigger surpluses than the Liberals and a greater reduction in debt (Bowen 2019). Yet Labor could have made a stronger case that its Keynesian

stimulus policies during the Global Financial Crisis had helped to save the Australian economy from recession and that the Rudd and Gillard deficits were relatively low by international standards at the time and largely due to falling revenue (see, for example, the claims by Rudd 2013; Swan 2012). Interestingly, Paul Keating (and a then terminally ill Hawke) seemed to recognise the need to defend Labor's past economic policies more than Labor's current leadership team (Hawke and Keating 2019). Labor officials subsequently acknowledged that their advertising failed to counter some of the key Liberal critiques of their policies, which will be discussed below (Jensen 2019: 68). Meanwhile, Labor's key positive arguments were lost in a mass of policy detail (see Chapters 13 and 23, this volume).

The Liberals

By contrast, the Liberals mounted a small-target campaign around a number of key themes and images. While neoliberal ideology still underpinned their position, especially in regard to critiquing big-spending and big-taxing governments, it was in a restricted, more palatable form that suggested the Liberals were increasingly aware of the difficulties of selling more explicit neoliberal ideology to the broader electorate (see Huntley 2019). Rather, the Liberals focused on undercutting Labor's slogans, as listed on the ALP website of 18 May 2019, of supporting 'a fair go for Australia' and 'standing up for middle and working Australia' against the 'top' or 'big' end of town.

First, after by-election losses, the Liberals advocated tax cuts for lower-income earners to challenge those proposed by Labor (Bowen 2019). The Liberals also reaffirmed that they would not take their previously proposed tax cuts for big business to the election. Significantly, Morrison (ABC 2019a) admitted that corporate tax cuts did not have public support and business needed to rebuild public trust, although it was claimed that his alternative tax agenda would still disproportionately benefit higher-income earners and undermine progressive taxation rates in the longer term (RMIT ABC Fact Check 2019).

Second, the Liberals argued that it was actually Labor that was being unfair. Morrison's slogan, 'A fair go for those who have a go' (Morrison 2019d), suggested the Coalition Government was the real supporter of fairness while Labor would be spending taxpayers' hard-earned money on

those who were less worthy—for example, welfare recipients. In short, Morrison was potentially mobilising *ressentiment* against welfare recipients (see further Hoggett et al. 2013). Morrison's neoliberal position here was also compatible with the Pentecostal 'prosperity gospel' (see further Wrenn 2019: 426) in which those who believe in God are rewarded by being wealthy while 'the ungodly become poor' (Almond 2019).[2] In a very successful scare campaign, the Liberals contentiously branded Labor's measures designed to close expensive tax concessions and loopholes as new 'taxes' (Henriques-Gomes and Koukoulas 2019), suggesting they would have a much broader impact than Labor claimed was the case (LP 2019a). Labor's franked dividend policies were branded the 'retiree tax', while its negative gearing measures were branded the 'housing tax', with claims the latter would both reduce house values and increase rents. In addition, Coalition advertisements erroneously suggested that Labor planned to introduce a 'death tax' on inheritance. The clear message of a suite of Liberal Party advertisements was that a Labor government would be a risk to voters' standard of living and the economy in troubling global economic times (LP 2019b). Meanwhile, Labor's big spending on the suite of policies discussed earlier was criticised. Labor was 'The Bill Australia can't afford' (LP 2019b). In short, the Liberals ran an effective campaign with simple and consistent messages that were designed to cut through and played on feelings of economic insecurity.

Fourth, Scott Morrison undermined Labor's argument that the Coalition Government supported the 'top end of town' by depicting himself as 'ScoMo', an ordinary Australian, the daggy dad from the suburbs who loved sport and having a beer down the pub. Morrison also mobilised his suburban dad persona to criticise Labor's environmental policies, arguing, for example, that Labor's electric car policy would 'end the weekend' given that, unlike the four-wheel-drives that families loved, the electric cars Shorten advocated people buy would not tow a trailer or boat or 'get you to your favourite camping spot with your family' (quoted in Remeikis 2019). While Turnbull's wealthy, elitist image potentially reinforced Labor's narrative, Morrison's image intentionally undercut it. Furthermore, unlike Turnbull in 2016, Morrison did not repeatedly denounce Labor as anti-business or emphasise the trickle-down benefits of corporate tax cuts, despite his own previous statements (cited in Hutchens 2017). Indeed, as already mentioned, he had acknowledged that business had to rebuild

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2   For a more detailed analysis of the impact of Pentecostalism on Morrison, see Almond (2019).

public trust after various scandals, including the findings of the banking royal commission that he had originally strongly opposed establishing. Instead of being associated with big business, Morrison had previously made a point of identifying himself with the 'quiet Australians'—those Australians who were not 'shouty voices on the fringes telling us what we're supposed to be angry and outraged about' but instead getting on with their everyday lives, working hard while looking after their families and supporting their local communities (Morrison 2019a). He argued that, while Labor was going on about division and 'class war', the job of Liberals was to get on with governing and to provide Australians with the basic services they needed (Morrison 2019a).

Nonetheless, there were still neoliberal underpinnings to the Liberals' arguments, including the populist ones mobilising the people against big government. They evoked the old neoliberal positions that the source of exploitation of ordinary people lies in the state ripping off their money (rather than exploitation in the labour market) and that the best way of improving voters' income is therefore to give them tax cuts. While the Coalition Government claimed to be returning the Budget to surplus, Labor was depicted as the party of debt: 'Labor can't manage money: That's why they are coming after yours' (LP 2019a). Similarly, Morrison raised old neoliberal arguments about reward and choice, arguing:

> All Australians who work hard should … keep more of what they earn … when it's in your hands, you're making the choices about where it's spent. I don't think the Government knows better than you do about where your money should go. That's why I believe in lower taxes for everybody. (Morrison, in NewCompany. com.au 2019a)

Morrison also depicted himself as supporting a neoliberal aspirational and self-reliant citizen as opposed to 'Bill Shorten, who just wants to tax all of those aspirations more' (Morrison 2019b).

However, some previous aspects of the neoliberal agenda were downplayed during the election campaign, including Howard-era culture war arguments that elite, politically correct 'special interests' were ripping off taxpayers (Hindess and Sawer 2004: 9). Despite his own socially conservative ideology, and the previously cited references to his 'quiet Australians' eschewing 'shouty voices on the fringes', Morrison avoided issues that would unleash divisions between conservatives and moderates within the Liberal Party or antagonise former moderate Turnbull voters. It also seems

likely that Liberal pollsters had picked up a more progressive mood for change in large sections of the electorate that they were trying to neutralise (Huntley 2019). Consequently, Morrison emphasised the number of women in his Cabinet and claimed that he believed in 'an Australia where you are accepted and acknowledged, regardless of your age, your ethnicity, your religion, your gender, your sexuality, your level of ability, or your wealth or your income' (Morrison 2019b). Meanwhile, the Christchurch (New Zealand) massacre had highlighted the risks of evoking ethnic and racial divisions.

Morrison's previous culture war interventions over issues ranging from the role of Captain Cook in Australian history (Morrison 2019c) to critiques of 'gender whisperers' in schools (Morrison 2018b) were largely put on hold. For example, Morrison sidestepped a question about Tasmanian legislation that would make specifying a gender on birth certificates optional, by supporting State sovereignty (Norman 2019). In the 2016 campaign, Morrison had highlighted claims of discrimination against Christians. Yet, in the 2019 Third Leaders' Debate, it was Shorten who stated that rugby player Israel Folau should not be sacked for proclaiming that homosexuals would go to hell while Morrison was more circumspect (NewCompany.com.au 2019b). Rather, Morrison relied on an image of his worshipping in his Pentecostal church, with arm raised, to reassure conservative Christian voters. Campaigning over such issues tended to be left to conservative community groups and to News Corp. Various religious leaders claimed that their campaigns over so-called religious freedom (including the right for religious schools to sack teachers who did not endorse their ethos) had reduced Labor's vote (Kelly and Shanahan 2019). An article in *The Australian* also accused Shorten of having ignited an 'unholy war' (Kelly 2019) and of illegitimately targeting Morrison's religious beliefs when Shorten expressed surprise that Morrison had initially evaded answering a journalist's question regarding his own views on whether gays went to hell (Crowe 2019).

Although Morrison eventually stated that he did not believe gays went to hell, he had opposed same-sex marriage and was one of the MPs who abstained from voting on the issue in parliament after the public voted overwhelmingly in favour during the postal plebiscite. It was noticeable that Morrison's speeches during the election campaign rarely evoked the biblical allusions that had peppered some of his previous speeches (for example, Morrison 2018a). However, Morrison's faith was very evident in his election victory speech, which was unusually religious in

tone by Australian standards. Morrison (2019e) wished Bill Shorten and his family 'God's blessing', while affirming that he had 'always believed in miracles' and 'tonight we've been delivered another one'. Morrison ended his speech with the words: 'God bless Australia.'[3]

Minor parties and populism

While this chapter has argued that both the Labor and the Liberal campaigns reflected some populist elements, the ideological position of PHON and the UAP more closely meet Mudde's (2017: 4) definition of full-blown populism, including 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" and "the corrupt elite"'. While the Greens' preferences generally favoured Labor, the Coalition's formal and informal preference arrangements with PHON and the UAP enabled it to benefit from more explicitly right-wing populist agendas, without having to enunciate them itself.

Morrison justified the Coalition's preference deal with Clive Palmer (and indirectly, the preference deals some Queensland LNP members agreed with PHON) by suggesting the Greens' environmental and climate change policies were a greater threat to Australia than Clive Palmer (Shanahan and Kelly 2019). The Greens' policies would exacerbate Labor policies on climate change that Liberals had already suggested would ruin the economy and cost working-class jobs in the mining sector (Canavan, cited in Livingston and Osbourne 2019).

Pauline Hanson has been described as the 'the quintessential radical right-wing populist', who anticipated the mobilisation of anti-elitism and opposition to foreign immigration that have 'become central to current radical right wing populist discourse' (Betz 2019; see also Grant et al. 2019). Her party's 2019 election campaign policies continued this tradition. For example, PHON supported removing Australia from the international refugee convention, massively reducing the immigration intake and introducing a Trump-style travel ban for people from 'extremist' countries (PHON n.d.).

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3   According to Middleton (2019), Morrison's commonly used expression 'How good is …', which also featured prominently in the speech, references a common Pentecostal expression, 'How good is God?'.

The UAP's mining magnate leader, Clive Palmer, funded an approximately $60 million advertising campaign that particularly targeted Labor's tax agenda, depicting it as ripping off ordinary Australians (Palmer 2019). The UAP is a sometimes unusual populist party—for example, UAP policy supported increasing the parliamentary representation of women (UAP 2019b). Nonetheless, the UAP's populism was evident in its rhetoric that the party would 'make Australia great again' by standing up for the people against self-interested politicians (Palmer 2019). In particular, the UAP argued that the existing political elite had been selling out Australia to Chinese commercial interests and the Chinese Communist Government might try to take over the country (UAP 2019a; Loomes 2019). Fear of China has been mobilised by other populists internationally—most prominently by Donald Trump.

Despite PHON and UAP preferences assisting the Coalition in retaining government, radical right-wing populism has not had as much electoral success in Australia as in some European and Asian countries. PHON won one Senate seat; the UAP won no seats.

Conclusion

As the overall analysis in this book establishes, election outcomes are usually determined by multiple factors. This chapter suggests that Labor lost the 2019 election in part because it did not win the ideological contest over the discursive framing of economic issues. Labor believed it could win the economic arguments because economic inequality was rising and wages were stagnating. Labor was convinced that only a relatively small number of voters would be negatively financially impacted by its election policies while far more would benefit from the revenue raised. However, the Liberals ran an effective campaign that succeeded in convincing sufficient numbers of voters that Labor's policies would impact detrimentally on most Australians and that the real risk to people's living standards was big-taxing and big-spending government. In so doing, the Liberals drew on neoliberal ideological positions that Labor had itself once reinforced, including cutting taxes. Previous Labor governments had also arguably inadvertently undermined many voters' confidence in the ability of governments to improve standards of living. As Robinson (2019) has noted: 'In the 1990s, Labor had laid waste to the institutions of centralised wage-fixation and economic regulation that established for many otherwise conservative voters a plausible linkage between

politics and material conditions.' Labor also did not manage to convince sufficient voters that it could improve their standard of living by managing a capitalist economy effectively. In statements more in tune with classic Labor social harmony ideology that has been discussed earlier, new Labor Leader, Anthony Albanese, argued that: 'The language used was terrible … unions and employers have a common interest. Successful businesses are a precondition for employing more workers' (quoted in Benson et al. 2019). The new Shadow Treasurer, Jim Chalmers, concurred that some of the language used, such as 'top end of town', did not strike the right chord in the Australian community (ABC 2019d). In other words, key Labor figures now believe that Labor's attempts at using elements of populism, by mobilising the people against the 'big' or 'top' end of town, were counterproductive. By contrast, the Liberals' use of populist strategies, especially mobilising the people against big government, appears to have cut through more effectively.

Labor's failure to win the economic arguments against a pared down and more electorally palatable version of neoliberalism potentially has lessons for social-democrats pursuing more left-wing policies in the United Kingdom and Europe, for left-wing Democrats in the United States and for those advocating left-wing forms of populism (Mouffe 2018: 66, 92). However, the right is not unscathed. While its critique of Labor policies succeeded, it is not clear how much of the government's broader economic narrative remains, or what levers a government promising surpluses will be able to pull to manage the economic difficulties that lie ahead.

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