

Quarterly Essay Lone Wolf: Albanese and the New Politics with Katharine Murphy

Katharine Murphy

Political Editor, Guardian Australia

In conversation with

Ebony Bennett

Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

Ebony Bennett [00:00:02] Gday, everyone. I'm Ebony Bennett, deputy director at the Australia Institute and welcome to our final webinar for the year and thanks to everyone who has joined us over 2022 for our webinars. This time we are discussing the latest quarterly essay which is Lone Wolf Anthony Albanese and the New Politics by Katharine Murphy, who we're joined by today, political editor of Guardian Australia. Just very quickly, before we get stuck into things, I would like to acknowledge that we live and work on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay our respects to elders past and present. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land. And a couple of things, just to make the Zoom work really well today.

Ebony Bennett [00:00:50] I'm not sure what that noise was. I'll just make sure that's not a problem somewhere else. If you've got questions for Katharine, you can put them into the Q and A box, and you should be able to upvote other people's questions if they look good to you. A reminder to please keep things civil and on topic in the chat or will get you out. And lastly, a reminder that this is being recorded and it will go up on our YouTube channel. That's Australia Institute TV later today. We've got close to 1200 people registered for today, so thank you all for coming along. Many of you will know Katherine Murphy if you tune in fortnightly for our poll position. She's Guardian Australia's political editor and host of the Australian Politics podcast for The Guardian. She's a Walkley Award winner, a two time winner of the poll, Lyneham Award for Excellence in Press Gallery Journalism and the author of *On Disruption*, as well as another quarterly essay, *The End of Certainty: Scott Morrison and Pandemic Politics*. And today, as I said, we are discussing her new quarterly essay, *Albanese and the New Politics*. It's called *Lone Wolf*. It's in all good news agents and bookstores right now. We do have a special offer for Australia Institute supporters. Mahendra will post that in the chat. But in *Lone Wolf*, Katherine, are you not only looking at a portrait of Anthony Albanese but kind of digging through the trials of the 2022 election, federal election campaign and covering things like the rise of the tales, the success of the Greens, and how kind of this new Parliament will work. There's a huge amount to get into this, and I do just want to congratulate you on it. As I said, I got it yesterday. I picked it up and could not put it down once I started reading it. It's a really gripping read given we all know the outcome.

Katharine Murphy [00:02:41] In fact, anyone who knows the story already has got an incredible account.

Ebony Bennett [00:02:45] But I do realise that this is a specific genre of writing that I love going through the trials of things, but that little behind the scenes look at how it all works. So before we get into I guess the guts of the quarterly essay and what it covers, I wanted to ask you a process question first. A long read like this. How many words is it? Did you say.

Katharine Murphy [00:03:06] 35,000. But who's counting? Yeah.

Ebony Bennett [00:03:08] How do you dive into a project like that as a journalist when you start?

Katharine Murphy [00:03:12] Thank you for that question. I really appreciate that. And also, I just want to tell all of the folks with us today on the webinars, you know, thank you for your support. And we have collaborated as regulars will know in other in other webinars and projects. And I'm very grateful for your support in terms of, well, God, 35,000 words, where do you start? And with a story like this, because it is a bit cinematic, the story and I wanted it to be it's sort of it's, it's an essay in two parts, the sort of first, I don't know, 60, 60 odd per cent is a character study of Anthony Albanese, our current Prime Minister, and because he is still a relatively unknown figure outside people who are really engaged with politics. And I wanted obviously there was an excellent biography written of him a couple of years ago by Karen Middleton, a journalistic colleague of mine. And if you are really interested in Anthony Albanese, I very much recommend you tracking down Karen's book because that is really forensic in terms of the whole biography and story. Mine is that mine's a little bit compressed, obviously full length. But what I really wanted to achieve with that, with the character study element of the essay was a character study, and by that I mean get into the psychology of how our Prime Minister operates and why he operates in the way that he does. But yours was a process question, right? Yeah. So how do you how do you put this together? Because it was partly about the prime minister and partly about the story of the election. Funnily enough, the the structure suggested itself to me in two of the first conversations I had for the piece. One was with the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, who at one point spoke to me about 2020, which was the hardest year in opposition as being like diving under a wave. You just basically you saw this enormous wave coming at you because of the pandemic. Yeah, that was going to play you headfirst into the ground. You could either stand there and try to argue with it or you could just go underneath it and then and then sort of surface at a time when that was more politically.

Ebony Bennett [00:05:32] Yeah, incredibly hard to be an opposition during those times.

Katharine Murphy [00:05:34] Yes, that's it. Right. So the wave and then I had an initial conversation with Simon Holmes a Court, who is obviously the organiser, founder of Climate 200. That was a really important super PAC style action committee that funded a number of the Thales campaigns and funnily enough, without reference to one another. So I. And opened his account of things by talking about that they were in the way they were on the wave, paddling on their surfboards. So when the wave came, the beneficial wave for tails and progressive candidates in the inner city, he was already on the board and waiting to catch it. So I thought, My God, how amazing. Like the structure of the essay has been just suggested in two conversations. So.

Ebony Bennett [00:06:21] And a very Australian metaphor as well.

Katharine Murphy [00:06:24] Exactly. I thought it would work. It certainly resonated with me. So we sort of had, you know, Anthony Albanese submerging and then we had Simon home support, big, big surf riding and that sort of took us into the back half of the site, which is what happened in the election election. And then the Prime Minister gets the final word on what might happen in the future.

Ebony Bennett [00:06:42] Yeah. So digging into this portrait of Anthony Albanese as a leader and a person, the title is obviously Lone Wolf and I wonder if you could just explain that a little bit to us why you landed on on that title and kind of what he's learnt about leadership along this journey from Opposition Leader to Prime Minister.

Katharine Murphy [00:07:02] Well that to me has been one of the more interesting trajectories that he's been on the last three years. Just sort of a bit of quick background. Anthony Albanese. Anthony Albanese and I arrived in politics in the at the same time, same year he arrived in Parliament, I arrived in the press gallery. So I've known him for a very long time and watched him in different capacities for a very long time. The thing that was sort of most interesting to me about the story of the last three years was him evolving from this lone wolf operator, insurgent political operator, to to a more I guess it's conventional leadership model where you've got a good team, you need to draw on them. And in fact, the team actually becomes part of your advantage in a political conversation that happens in 2022. Now, look for some folks watching on with us today. I'm sure you just shrug your shoulders and say, well, God leadership, you just got to do a course or something, right? You know, you can learn to lead. I think what's really fascinating about Anthony Albanese as a person and he is he is genuinely a Prime Minister, you need to understand as a person, I think in order to understand how he operates. He spent a lot of time in childhood. People will know this story. Don't roll your eyes. I understand he spent a lot of time in childhood alone with his mother, who was incapacitated by illness. He had to accept a lot of personal responsibility and practical responsibility very early in life. As he says to me at one point in the essay, If I didn't plan, we didn't date yet. So he was a kid who circumstances demanded a be an adult in many in many phases of life and he developed habits at that point which really hardwired which is this is all on me. I need to think three steps ahead. I can't rely on anyone. I've just it's me or nothing yet. And I think that those habits actually were reinforced. Oddly, as

Anthony Albanese kind of moved out of adolescence and became a student activist and then sort of moved into the into the Labour Party in Sydney and that kind of, you know, those times of the eighties, I guess the early eighties in Sydney, the whole lift scene in Sydney's. Yeah, I think really fascinating at that point. But oddly enough I think those habits of being a bit of a lonely figure, a bit of a soul operator, were actually reinforced by politics because again, a really critical thing to understand about the Prime Minister is he is from the minority wing of the minority faction in the Labour Party. He was from the hard left in Sydney at a time when everybody just deified the New South Wales, right. Yeah, this is Paul Keating's kind of zenith.

Ebony Bennett [00:10:09] Times have changed, times have changed.

Katharine Murphy [00:10:11] But times have changed it. I think that's a bit that's a fair observation there. But but that was really formative for him. So he was from the minority grouping in the minority faction. He was ambitious, impatient, I think slightly volcanic. And he learnt that if he was basically to progress in labour politics, which was his great desire, he had to blast his way in.

Ebony Bennett [00:10:36] For his own path.

Katharine Murphy [00:10:37] To forge his own path. But more than that, quite, quite aggressively and assertively forge his own path and institutionally take on forces who had the numbers to thwart him. Yeah. So what, the way I characterise this is that he developed an insurgents mindset. Right. And if we think about insurgents I mean. Perhaps we don't want to think about some insurgents at all, but if we think about how they operate, it's always need to know, right? There's a very small circle of trust. You don't communicate your objectives beyond the circle of trust. You certainly don't develop strategy or policy in groups. You just don't do that because you know you could die.

Ebony Bennett [00:11:17] The risk is too great to die.

Katharine Murphy [00:11:18] And yet professionally doing that right. So I think the sort of that 20 years of political operation actually reinforced this sense of solitary ness that it was all on him and all in his head. So what he had to do over the last three years with the colleagues was to convince them and through them, the Australian public, that he had the skills to lead, that he had the skills to build a team, to rely on people. You know, even when he wasn't entirely certain of their motives. Yeah. And that for a guy of middle age, you know, these are these are really hard wired habits that you're trying to unpick and try to unpick in, you know, with time accelerating. So we delve into that quite a bit.

Ebony Bennett [00:12:08] Yeah, I was really struck. You talked about that he needed to learn that leading the Labour Party wasn't a hostile takeover or a solo act. And then a little bit later that he learnt things like, you know, if you going to be leading a big group or cabinet meetings, for example, you can't telegraph your opinion on something too early, which I found a really interesting observation, but I always I also was really interested. I mean, he, he did lend me things, which was quite a contrast to Scott Morrison. And you know, in the last quarterly debate he was just like, no.

Katharine Murphy [00:12:42] I've got this, yeah, I've got this, you know, step back. But I've got this. Yeah, you know, it was sort of yeah, the character studies, the two character studies that I've been called to do in these longform essays, you know, could not be more different and all kinds of it. But that's fascinating for me as a writer that just because they're, you know, these people are all doing really important jobs, very stressful jobs in very stressful times. They will operate differently. They have a different sense of themselves. They have a different sense of how they project into groups. And that's because politics for me is kind of like anthropology, right? That's why I'm sort of interested in it. So, yes, they they were very different. They responded to events differently. They learnt different lessons. They in Morrison. And in the end, the counterpoint between those two states became quite important for Labour's electoral fortunes. I don't think that Anthony Albanese would have set out with that as a plan. That was a sound strategy in a way. But yeah, I think it was an important contrast that actually sort of was was he was basically helped Labour, you know, pick up pick up the seats that Labour needed in order to form a majority government. I think that was part of the story.

Ebony Bennett [00:13:57] So before we kind of dive into the election campaign, you write a lot about Albanese's strategic thinking and looked at that through kind of a policy prism. Some of the big calls that he made on policy and I'm thinking here, particularly about childcare and the voice to parliament and why why are those two policies? What do they tell us about him as a leader in those fights that he's willing to pick or not state he's fighting?

Katharine Murphy [00:14:24] Yeah, exactly. Look, I think, you know, I had to narrow the field in the way that there were more. There were there were a number of important decisions. But for my observation, childcare was a really important early call. This was in the first year of his opposition leadership. He was he basically made a captain's call on that package. He was resisted fiercely by most of the leadership group in most of the shadow cabinet. You know, they were all worried about the price tag, you know, that they would. But this was you know, this was basically cost a bomb. And they had just come out of an election campaign where they'd spent a lot of money. Yeah. Australians would go, No, no thanks. I don't want a bit too much. Too much, right. So this was an early call he made and he got pushback right up until literally hours before he announced it. And, you know, he said to the colleagues in collaborative style, bring me something else, like if there's a better idea, I'll hear it. I'll listen. I'm convinced this is right. I'm convinced this is what we need to do now.

Ebony Bennett [00:15:31] And it can't just be good. It's got to be better.

Katharine Murphy [00:15:33] Exactly. Right. So anyway, so he made that call. And as it turned out, that was an early downpayment in Labour's economic strategy and it was also an appeal to women that became very, very important over the ensuing couple of years. Yeah, so that was important. The voice I think is important because it sort of as he's. His great friend Meredith Bergmann says he's a sort of 1970s, eighties left, left wing left winger. But he wants you. He has this sense of social causes that they're important. So I think that tells you a little bit about his politics because I think a lot of people look at Albanese now and can't see the guy who liked to fight Tories. You know, that guy seems to have vanished off the sort of baiter. Albert He doesn't seem as present anymore. I think the voice takes this debate, Albo. The other thing is also climate change, which was the absolutely critical call that they made and again, fascinating. Boy, oh, boy. Guys, I wish I knew this in real time, but that was an absolute struggle to the arts degree as well with the colleagues. Not because anyone thought climate action was a terrible idea. They all thought climate action was important, but they had literally lost every election campaign since 2013. Yeah, with climate being part of the story and wind 43% 2030. Target came into shadow cabinet after being contested vigorously in the leadership group for most of the week leading up to the decision when that target arrived in the shadow cabinet meeting on that Friday in December. A number of people have described what happened next as a collective anxiety attack happened around the table.

Ebony Bennett [00:17:21] Which you can totally.

Katharine Murphy [00:17:22] Understand. I could understand it. I was aware of it in real time, but but that was how it was described to me. It was sort of even people who had been solid on climate action the whole way, all through the climate wars. They sort of they sort of had this moment where they thought, oh, my God, this a lot of say this will kill us and we really don't know which it is. Yeah. So and that whole discussion played out anyway. Obviously Chris Bowen, the responsible shadow minister, got his target. It came out, it was announced and it was critical. Yeah.

Ebony Bennett [00:17:53] And as it turned out and there's a couple of interesting observations around that change from Mark Butler to Chris Bowen that you should buy the essay and read it because I found that really interesting on how to deal with the internal politics of things. But I do kind of want to stick with climate as an issue that did become fundamental to the election. It was kind of promised over several elections and hadn't turned up electorally. And this was really the election where it became fundamental. And as he said, they could have made Labour, could have made quite a different decision and it would have actually probably hands on electorally in the. Yes, exactly. Atmosphere that we.

Katharine Murphy [00:18:31] Saw. And Chris Bowen says that quite candidly. Yeah, in the essay it's sort of like had we made because basically the two options that Labour wrestled with through that basically once Chris Bowen came into the portfolio and they were rebooting

the climate policy, they had two sort of indicative options through that 12 months. Basically, one was a kind of minimalist safe option where the 2030 target would be somewhere in the throes of higher than the Coalition's, but well below what they saw and taken to the UN. Yep. Demanded, and well below what they've taken to the election. With some funding for renewables and other things that was considered a low risk option. Then there was the higher risk option, which was ambition in the in the forties. I do think that Chris Bowen actually considered a target over 50 at one point. Yeah, but I think basically the RepuTex work they commissioned, which was basically a sort of set of economic analysis to work out what they could deliver and what they could sell and defend. I think that settled the number for Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy fans. You'll love that. At one point the indicative number was 42, which if you're a Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy fan, you'll know, is that you can save a lot more than the universe. Yeah. Anyway, it was 43 and and as you say, it's, it became very critical to, to the contests certainly that played out in the metro and inner metro rims in in that election. And responses very candidly, had we not taken the more ambitious option or we would have lost basically because voters would not have voters who wanted climate action would not have been given something to vote for.

Ebony Bennett [00:20:18] Yeah, there wasn't a material difference that enough of a difference between the Liberal Party and Labour. And you also catalogue some of the other big developments and electoral shifts from this election, which of course is well on the one hand the decimation of the Liberals, but mostly the success of the independents, particularly in those inner city electorates, the so-called tails, as well as the Greens winning seats from the Liberals as well as Labour, even Queens. Land. A lot of that was linked to climate, but also integrity. I was also just really interested you spoke to Zoe Daniel and they've obviously all got their own reasons why they came in to Parliament. But talking to her specifically where, you know, obviously climate change is important, but integrity seemed to be such a key thing for her having reported on the presidency. She kind of had this sense that. She couldn't actually sit it out. It was her obligation to step up.

Katharine Murphy [00:21:30] Yeah, I was really moved is not the quite, quite the right word. But when we had that conversation, I understood her motives entirely. Zoe Daniel is basically won the seat of Goldstein in in Victoria from the liberal incumbent incumbent Tim Wilson. She had to be persuaded to run because she was obviously she's a female journalist. She's been in the public domain for quite a long time. She understands, you know, some of the free feedback that you can be given as a as a, you know, a moderate public figure. Parts of her family were against it, just concerned for her wellbeing. Her son was actually really for it, really pride and just said, you know, you have to do this. But anyway, she and I had this conversation. I'm still a journalist. She's a former journalist. And I asked her to really distil what the why of why she stepped forward. And as you said, plummet is important. And the other issues that they ran on were important to her and particularly her kids. But for her as a professional, she had a reported on the Trump administration in the US as the Washington correspondent for the ABC for a number of years. What she saw there in terms of democratic decay really troubled her at a at a at a visceral, profound level. She could see when she returned home and sort of echoes of that tone and rancour and elements where we could sort of slide along the same direction. Now, I don't think Zoe Daniel ever said to me at any point that she was a one woman antidote to any of these

megatrends. But she said it was really that, that, that radicalised me that. And I thought I have to, I have to do whatever I can to try and make sure we don't end up in the same place.

Ebony Bennett [00:23:24] MM And part of you was also, as you said, talking to Simon Holmes Court about the Climate 200. And again, make sure you read the essay. I think there's some really interesting things in there about the invitation, I think, to Cathy McGowan to join, which she decided not to for various reasons. But the independents obviously were hugely successful in this election, particularly in these Liberal heartland states. On the one hand that made the path to victory easier for Labour. I'm not that they ended up needing it, but I'm just interested. We had seen kind of Helen Haines and Zali Steggall candidates like that and things like that being kind of the early model. But this was just on a whole different scale. And part of that, I think you've talked about was. The unlock ability of Scott Morrison being a factor. But what really made 2022 different to 2019 for independents? Well, I think.

Katharine Murphy [00:24:27] You know, you've touched on it there and we were talking about radicalising forces a minute ago. Well, the primary radicalising force in the 2022 election was Scott Morrison. Certainly that's the view that the Independence fraternity have. That is the the views of the Labour Party has. Some of you guys will have seen reports last night at the of Labour's campaign review, which was released late yesterday, in which this point is made quite forcefully. Paul Erickson, who is Labour's campaign director who I spoke to for the essay, also makes this point forcefully that Morrison was a really radicalising force for a number of Australian voters, that it sounds a bit passive like. Before I get to your point, which is what was the difference, Ron? Why did it that can sound a little bit passive when we when we make that observation that, oh, everyone just sort of sat back and thought all that. Scott Morrison is a bit of a dud. Right? And then everyone just turns up, all these independents turn up and the Labour Party turns up and they win because everyone's sick of the other guy. Look, there is this, there's some truth to that. But I think we sort of can go a little deeper on that in terms of Morrison as a radicalising force. Look at the major party campaign level. What is really fascinating to me is that Albanese and his team managed to pull off this quite neat PM thimble trick in a way. Like if we look at if we look at what the Labour Party said and did about Scott Morrison over the closing 12 months of the contest, we've got a delegitimization exercise that is as effective as any of that I have seen. The only one that's closer or slightly better in degrees of order, order of magnitude is what Tony Abbott did to Julia Gillard in terms of orders of magnitude. Right. There was an aggressive negative framing of the Prime Minister from from the get go. That was sustained over, over more than 12 months period. But somehow Anthony Albanese managed to hover above that fray and not sort of get himself wound up in that which would have actually made him unpopular. Yeah, because of the negativity. Anyway, that's just a glancing observation about the radicalising force of Scott Morrison. It's partly Morrison. It's part of what all these groups did with the with the prime minister's character largely using his own words. Yes. Right. So that happened in terms of the difference, core difference between 2019, because an early iteration of the deals were on the field in 2019, didn't do quite as well, although they got the breakthrough in Warringah, obviously, with Zali Steggall and Helen Haines also took over the seat of In Die from Cathy McGowan, which I think is the first.

Ebony Bennett [00:27:19] Actual independent had I think had been elected.

Katharine Murphy [00:27:22] I think or another after another independent. Right. So there was a bet on change there. So, you know as customers summarises the pollster for the tales told me somewhat haughtily at one point, you know, if you'd looked closer at the 2019 election result, you might have seen 2022 happening anyway, pick up goes away. But the, the, the critical thing, I think between 2019 and 22 was candidate selection money. There was a lot of it, and I think they spent it effectively because it basically gave the two campaigns a level of professionalisation that they didn't have in the last cycle.

Ebony Bennett [00:28:00] And you talked about the fact that they were quite ruthless, too, about it wasn't just any old independent candidate you had to be in with a chance.

Katharine Murphy [00:28:08] Basically, yes. I think climate to go in terms of because candidate selection was obviously done at a distance from then. Yeah, but Climate 200 took the decision. If you're not going to win, if you if there's not a high probability of victory, we're not going to give you scads of money, but you're not going to do that. We're going to focus our resources. Yeah, we think we're going to BrightSource.

Ebony Bennett [00:28:30] So I thought that was really interesting there where you talked about like it turns out probably someone could have done really well in Higgins, but there was no voices of type of campaign, so there was no one for them to back.

Katharine Murphy [00:28:41] Total mystery. I sort of poked fun at myself about this because if you're regular on the web and webinars, you'll know that I was I was saying the whole, you know, months before the election, it's really hard for the for Labour to win. And I genuinely believe that because I was looking at a conventional pathway to victory on an electoral map.

Ebony Bennett [00:28:58] Yeah.

Katharine Murphy [00:28:58] Quite hard and turns out didn't exist. There was an entire new pathway to victory anyway, but it was sort of like I went from I think myself as a, as an analyst and reporter sort of downplaying the prospects of this progressive breakthrough to then as I was preparing this. Saying then a burgeoning conspiracy everywhere was kind of like, Oh my God, this was a total stitch up the whole time. They obviously coordinated, coordinated this. I must have taken a decision not to run in Higgins because that gave Labour a critical seat. Right. I was sort of like way deep in the conspiracy, had to go for several walks around the block and calm down really. But but it was yeah. There were some interesting calls like Islam at home support. When I asked him, why didn't you? Why wasn't there, you know, why wasn't there an independent in Higgins? I said, all well couples sort of

presented, but it just didn't materialise similarly. Right. If a two year old had had run in Brisbane or Brian, would they be green seats? I don't know. You know, if a Teal had run in Bennelong in Sydney, would that now be a tail, say Donna. But anyway, the way you know, the way basically where people ran and the resourcing that they were given, you know, it made a very material impact on results. And then on the final seat count because obviously Labour got there in majority just. Yeah.

Ebony Bennett [00:30:22] So the Greens also had a very successful election. Yeah. And in particular again taking Liberal seats which they're sometimes accused of focussing too much on, on Labour states. So that was a really good campaign from the Greens with obviously great results in both houses. I am interested though in the interviews that you did with Adam Bandt about how he works with Anthony Albanese and I think there was a quote in there that he kind of he knows that they can have very forceful differences of opinions, but he's very confident he that Albo won't lie to him. Yeah. So I guess I wanted to because both of those ladies were around in different roles in 2010, in the Gillard term of Parliament and had to work quite closely together. Yeah. How much do you think that impacted both of them about how they now work together or hope.

Katharine Murphy [00:31:23] To work together? Well, I think it's I think the relationship's important. As you said, the relationship was formed in the 43rd parliament because I think that's the parliament that Adam Bandt came in. That's right. Yes. Right. So just sorry. I just haven't got.

Ebony Bennett [00:31:37] An election in front of.

Katharine Murphy [00:31:38] Me. It's my goodness. There's a lot of characters in this. Yes. So he came in in the 43rd Anthony Albanese at that time was the manager of government business. So he got to know all of the crossbenchers.

Ebony Bennett [00:31:50] Sorry, sorry. Adam, I think came in in 2010, 2010, but was around for the regular.

Katharine Murphy [00:31:55] Yeah. Okay. There we go. Sorry. That's, that's my understanding. So anyway, they were, they, they got to know each other quite well during that Parliament because obviously Albanese's key job in the Gillard phase was keeping the legislative programme on track. On track I think, look, Adam Bandt and Anthony Albanese run political parties who are contesting for the same group of voters. They never going to sit out, sit down and hug it out. I don't think, you know, there would be reasonable questions about whether or not over the long term Labour's heading for a period of Coalitionism with the Greens a debate that goes round. And for residents in the A.C.T. we see that here. Rob Yeah, but I think at this point I think Adam Bandt, you know, has been the Greens leader to

break through a plateau for the Greens in terms of representation he has broken through. I think Labour strategists acknowledge that the Greens are doing materially better than them in terms of recruiting young people, particularly young voters. So I think Adam Bandt, I suspect, is one to go, is going to want to blaze his own path there and see what the what the whether there's a natural ceiling for Greens representation. So he's got his own objectives. The Prime Minister has got his objectives obviously. And you know, we might get to the big flicks in the piece which is, you know, that ALBANESE in this time of this megatrend of lack of major party support can say this major party momentum, yeah I think is amazing. But anyway, pop that opinion that what I'm saying is these guys do have different objectives. I think where they're at in their heads is to try and maximise the position of both of their political movements. But for progressive people who are sitting out there wondering, is this going to be a complete car crash? Well, look, maybe you can't rule that out, but I think as a starting proposition, they they Adam Bandt is very precise language to describe it. He feels as though Anthony Albanese will not lie to him, that they have an open channel of communication where they can talk candidly about issues that they want to progress. The big test of this, of course, is coming over the next 6 to 12 months as as we get further and further into this substance of climate policy. Yeah. Whether or not these guys can hold it together enough to achieve, you know, first steps in getting this transition done or whether, you know, differentiation starts to become more important. But anyway, I can't answer that question right now. Yeah, we just have to wait and see.

Ebony Bennett [00:34:36] I did want to ask you about that major party moment that Anthony Albanese sees here and to just expand on that a little bit, because the trend seems to have been away from action yet for a long time. So why does he why does he say that? Some of it.

Katharine Murphy [00:34:53] Was funny when we sort of spoke about that. I'd sort of remember being sort of mildly startled by it. Not that he would. Not that that's where he would be in his head, because Anthony Albanese is a Labour man to the core. You know, his whole personal identity was formed in labour politics in Sydney in the, you know, in the seventies and eighties. It's, it is how he thinks it is who he is. So I'm not surprised at one level that he would want to try and sort of use this as a moment to remake the case for a major party and the Australian political tradition, i.e. the Australian Labour Party, because that's just how the guy thinks. But he genuinely does believe that because of, you know, demography, various realignments that we saw in the 2022 campaign, that if Labour can be a half decent government, if it can do what it said it would do prior to the election, if it can sort of restore that bedrock of trust that got eroded, well, actually came back during the first year of the pandemic and then got eroded and eroded substantially. He he can see there's a moment there to capture where, you know, you don't have to think about whether we're in a we're in a drift towards a scandi style permanent magic minority government arrangement, which is where Solomon Homes the court's head is at. Yeah, he Anthony Albanese does not see that as inevitable. But it's it's quite you know I've been in some of the conversations I've been having around the I've described this as a flex because it's the only word I've got for it. Because if you look at the data, obviously, you know the trend away from major party voting and day part and part partisan organisation, I think the political scientist call it anyway. Sorry guys, but that sort of the what Gaby Chen, my dear friend and colleague Gaby Chen would

call rusting of yeah that this is basically fixed in the Australian electoral saying this has been a progression of decades not just of the last 5 minutes. And certainly if we look at the Australian Shinn study that was released a couple of days ago, that really underscores this megatrend. Right, that major parties, the big ramparts of the Australian Democratic scene are in a period of catastrophic decline. Now Anthony Albanese thinks not. He thinks there's a coalition that you can build and by that I mean a voter coalition, coalition that you can build in order to raise, remake the case for the stability, certainty, responsiveness of major parties. Now, that's a hell of an ambition to face off as a prime minister. That's a pedestal that, you know, it could be a long, nasty fall, but that that is certainly in his head and he's sort of playing. I think obviously governments have to be minutely focussed on what's happening now. You know, what's going to happen in three days time, what's going to happen in three months and three years. You're always kind of refracting through that prism. But I think in his head, this sort of grand strategy is we can we can make the case that major party politics doesn't suck. Yeah. And if we do that, then we can basically reboot. Reboot the Democratic project.

Ebony Bennett [00:38:19] Yeah. So I've just got kind of one more question before we go to questions from the audience. So I can say we've got nearly 800 people on the line with us. Thanks very much for joining us today. We'll get to your questions very shortly. But I did kind of want to end on kind of the moment we find ourselves in now and I guess the new politics of the of the title. So I guess I was struck that Christopher Pyne kind of talked about his dealings with Anthony Albanese in a similar way to Adam Bandt and some of the independents that you spoke to. But also you kind of had a bit of a focus on the primacy of Parliament and his understanding of the processes of Parliament and why all of that is important. And I guess I'm based around convention and why he really, I think, has chosen to in particular elevate things like the sacred ministries and making a real point of that. Yeah. And that kind of. Scott Morrison used to make fun of me. Sometimes he's attention to all of that stuff, but. Talking about that loss of trust and why integrity was important. Do you think he's kind of responding? Is that his response to that movement within the electorate?

Katharine Murphy [00:39:30] Yeah, I think it is. I think it is. I think he sort of understands this, that I hate the word granular thought when people say granular level. Yeah, but I think it's sort of I think it is I think it's true in this case. I do think he has it does understand that at quite a granular level. And I think the initial down payments on that is absurd. Obviously, there's the Integrity Commission. That's how he conducts the parliament. Like all of the sort of consultations and stuff he does, whether or not he needs to or not.

Ebony Bennett [00:40:02] Yeah, I'm going to say because they're in majority, I don't have to. So this is a down payment, I guess, and I'm building some political capital with.

Katharine Murphy [00:40:08] Exactly. Yeah. And and we see not only then not only people who have been democratically elected to represent their communities and who are trying to present a different new style of politics that's more, you know, idealistic, community focussed, all that sort of stuff. I think he does understand that. I do think he understands that

and wants to seek to validate it. Now, obviously, if you're a you know, if you're a very cynical person and, you know, to some extent we all are. You can say, well, that's just entirely self-interested, right? Because obviously, while over the buffer state of the tales exist, it's extremely difficult for the Liberal and National parties to get back in majority government. I think that's fair. I think it is absolutely in Labour's political interest to basically validate the two buffer state rather than seek to go to war with it. And you could sort of say, well, you know, this, that, that it's all responses that, you know, the last six months basically have been responses to trends that are very obvious. And in any decent opinion polling, you say, right. So it's just a survival instinct that's kicked in. Look, I think that's true. I do think obviously, like, you know, everyone in politics operates with that mindset, with that very transactional mindset. It's partly true, but I do think Albanese has been thinking about his own version of a democratic decay for quite a long period of time before he was Opposition Leader again, he and I had a couple of really interesting conversations on my podcast, for example, about his concern, his big anxiety. I think as a progressive Australian has been the sort of the rise of cancel culture and that people are not talking to one another anymore. And he views this through a prism of progress. Right. As a person who's had to getting back to our insurgent, right. Either blast his way in or build coalitions in order to get himself in. The big kind of lesson of Anthony Albanese's professional life is nothing changes unless minds change. Yeah, nothing ever changes. Right. And so I think he's been turning around different versions of this in his head, probably for the best part of a decade. Right. Like what? What what you have to do as a progressive in this moment in order to make sure that progress continues to happen. Because, you know, that's where he starts. But all say, you know what? What are the tools that enable progress to happen? Which is why he's so fixated on the parliament, why so fixated on traditions in Westminster and all that sort of stuff. In his mind, I mean, this might sound a bit hyperbolic, but it's like, you know, that's these are the conventions and customs that stand between us and chaos yet broad. So I think it's sort of, you know, it might be even a bit diffuse in his own mind, right? It might it mightn't be that he's got a 20 point plan right in his back pocket. But I do think he's been playing this around in his head for years and years.

Ebony Bennett [00:43:19] Yeah. Yeah. It's interesting you say that, because in my observations, like a Labour government in a majority, a similar way to a Coalition government in majority might be in political interest to keep buffers like the Greens and others happy, but they don't often do it. I think this is quite a different approach for me. Yeah, from my observation, I know.

Katharine Murphy [00:43:43] It's true, but I think it's also, you know, one thing we did slightly volte over in terms of, you know, who is this guy? Why does he operate this way? What's he had to learn? I think, you know, in the essay sort of does guide to this a bit like obviously that the experience in that 43rd parliament was really important and yeah yeah in terms of what several things he he basic if you ask him he will say you know if you say what did the 43rd tell you teach you? What did you learn from that? He'll say in no particular order. I learnt that you can have power and you can throw it away in a heartbeat. It's all gone. Yeah. And. If it's gone, all the things that you did, all the things that you tried to make better, they go and they go on time. And the only way sometimes that you can try and. Fortify the policy legacy that you're trying to implement is relationships, is making sure that

you've got as wide a footprint as what a buy in for all of that as possible. And that works, you know, both practically in the parliament and looking over the heads of the parliamentarians, lawmakers to to the voters. Right. It's always about trying to expand the coalition for things that he think thinks are important. Yeah. So, you know, will they be able to sustain this mode of operation of that over time or what we're going to see we sit on a on a perch very close to the table, became very close watch.

Ebony Bennett [00:45:14] That's right. I'm going to go to questions from the audience now. Thank you. There's heaps here. The first one is from Claire Pagani, who says, was it a good call to support the stage three tax cuts and can Labour rescind that decision given interest rates, inflation and survival struggles? You do touch on that very slightly in the in the essay. Yeah. What do you think that's tricky.

Katharine Murphy [00:45:37] Well, if you're a regular on our webinars, you'll know exactly what I think is the statutory tax cuts, which isn't much, but what do they do about it? Look, I think we did see prior to the budget quite a conservative effort to start a conversation about whether or not, you know, that that was that is viable in the current context. Handing those tax cuts back to wealthy people is viable in the current economic context, that context. But how that's going to play out is I'm not really sure I know there are people in the government certainly who want to try and build the case for wanting them back. Yes, absolutely dead. But I think there are also others in the government who are quite concerned just at that core level, that if you say you got to do something, you need to do it. Otherwise you're kind of torpedoing your whole water integrity strategy yet. And I think that dialogue is ongoing and probably will before the election. Yes. So but, you know, look, I think that they understand, you know, it's one of it's one of those sort of, you know, sliding door moments. But could you replay the whole three years of you took a different position on stage three? Would they still have won the election? I mean, who knows? But but.

Ebony Bennett [00:46:55] Kind of a bit of a mirror to the the climate policy that decision like where they they decided, no, they were going to exactly stick to their guns and here wasn't worth.

Katharine Murphy [00:47:05] The fight. Wasn't worth the fight. Right. And you make you know, in opposition, you make a million calls like that. Some of them are good calls. Some of them are not good calls. I think stage three was not a good call. But I think if you ask them, they would be you know, I don't know what whether it will be a majority or not in terms of the cabinet. But a number of people would say, you know, that we that we had to take that decision quite early in the piece. Had we taken a different decision, that could have basically been a drag, a gravitational drag on us throughout the term. And look, maybe that's right. Who knows? Yeah. Anyway, the fiscally reckless, hopefully, hopefully we can inch towards sanity. Who knows?

Ebony Bennett [00:47:43] The next question is from Alicia Johnston. He says Can ALP support the level of climate action we need and still win the votes they need to stay in power. Well I greens until is the answer for climate policy essentially.

Katharine Murphy [00:47:57] Boy that's a good question. I wish I knew the answer to not really. Does it.

Ebony Bennett [00:48:01] Really solve all the worst.

Katharine Murphy [00:48:02] Of all the world's problems we knew that wanted. No, no. It is an excellent question. I'm not I'm not laughing about it. That's that's a real cutlery question. And look, I think they're thinking in terms of 2022 was very much that they they did not feel confident that they could write off their traditional territories, the Labour Party and have any prospect of majority government. So that was why that sort of climate policy discussion was so calibrated. Right, and why the anxiety attack. It's like, have we got this right? This is like it's like brain surgery, sort of like have we got this right? And that's that's and again, if we sort of look to Labour's campaign review, which was released last night, it's not very long if you want to go and track that down on the edge of that and have a look at. It's quite actually an interesting summary. I think the the the view of the review is, is we we have to. Still look to our regional territory in terms of what they're saying to it. You know, as Labour people to the Prime Minister, we, the Labour Party have to still look at regional territory. We can't just sort of assume that this very neat realignment will occur in the electorate where the Liberal and National Parties become the regional party exclusively to Labour through a more metro focussed climate policy becomes the, the, the cities of the Cities Party.

Ebony Bennett [00:49:35] And I think he talked in here about Paul Erickson kind of I think Michelle Roland had asked him. Yeah. That, that actually no that wasn't where we saw the future.

Katharine Murphy [00:49:44] Is.

Ebony Bennett [00:49:44] That it wasn't the. The Teal seats essentially that Labour was aiming for was.

Katharine Murphy [00:49:50] Because of that were pointing to important context, which is that there has been this debate in the Labour Party for several years now about whether or not such a realignment is possible, whether or not the Labour Party can decouple from its labour rights and represent progressive people in metropolitan Australia and leave the Coalition to regional territory. You know, the smartest people in the Labour Party have been around and around that question for several years. I think they're resting. Just disposition

remains. No, we can't actually do that. It's not how it works. And we need to sort of, you know, maintain our liberal roots because otherwise, you know, maybe you can pull it off in electoral sense. Maybe. But are we even the Labour Party anymore?

Ebony Bennett [00:50:36] Yeah, I guess I also just want to I don't think we touched on that. I maybe had a question here that I skipped over. And in terms of climate policy, Katharine talks about this concept of swimming between the flags. And so the context now is obviously that we have a climate super majority in the parliaments and the Australians clearly voted for climate action. But can you just expand a little on that idea?

Katharine Murphy [00:51:00] Well, well, it is because if you look at that sort of yeah, I characterise it, sorry about all the beach metaphors, they just seemed to work. It just seemed to give me a scaffold and a structure. Yeah, I sort of describe that deliberation as like swimming between the flags at a certain point, you know, you could go slightly outside the flag, but a shock might get you right. So it's sort of that it's it reflects a point in time judgement that they make about how can we basically keep our traditional territories speaking honestly to them, how can we also keep it with our metro progressive vote voting base? You know, that is that is a highly calibrated exercise. Now, you could look perhaps at the 2022 election result and you could say, oh, well, they possibly could have been braver. Maybe the flags could have been extended, whatever, further up the beach. Maybe they could have actually gotten away with electorally advocating a higher target. It's sort of it is for me that's imponderable, because it's sort of like you don't know what other you know, what other effects you put in motion. But as it says, right, this has been and, you know, the first election that I've seen since 2013, that we're back to sort of where we were in 2007 in terms of where the community set, in terms of wanting action. Right there is, as it says, a supermajority is the Greens, you know, expanded electoral footprint. There is the tools basically sitting in Liberal Party centre, right, progressive metro heartland and the Labour Party. There is a supermajority there for action. I suspect the first iteration of action that we're going to see is what Labour promised at the election for two reasons. One, that integrity point that we raised with stage three, that's a problem. The other moving part in all of this is energy and energy prices and what's happening in that divided present time. Now, at the time when these guys had their anxiety attack in the shadow cabinet, about 43%, obviously hostilities were building up in in terms of Russia, Ukraine, but that conflict had not yet happened. And that conflict has created this, you know, global energy shock, right, which is then sort of pushes people into cost of living territory. This energy, which again is politically difficult for that super majority. Yeah, all the components of that super majority. So anyway, you know, talk about swimming between the flags. I think we've got to swim out a little further, I think, to see how all of this sort of eventually coalesces. But I think Labour will be minded, notwithstanding this idea that maybe they could have been more ambitious to try and stick to what they said they would do.

Ebony Bennett [00:53:47] I do have a question around energy and fossil gas and all of those huge expenses at the moment. The costs going through the roof. Yeah, cabinet has been put off I think because Anthony Albanese has COVID at the moment. They were due to discuss that. What what are the options on on.

Katharine Murphy [00:54:12] That at the moment in terms of the energy regulator, the regulatory intervention? Yeah, well, look, I think the Prime Minister had hoped to try and bring the Premiers into a comfortable alignment this week. Basically what they're looking at price caps for gas and for electricity in the East Coast, sense of electricity that is coal. The majority of steel of generation on the East Coast is still coal based. There was some advice that went to shadow cabinet. This is the federal cabinet which. Talking about, to be clear, about a week ago that said, gas is fine. You can you can do price caps for gas, but coal we're not so sure about because that's normally the province of the states. And of course, Queensland still owns some of the generators. Yeah, it's sort of the the legal advice was, you know, we think we think you can do it, but we're not entirely certain be better if you could actually get the sides to do it.

Ebony Bennett [00:55:14] And of course, it risks you know, there's other considerations. Obviously, if you're making fossil fuel cheaper, that helps out with cost of living, but then it gives you a climate change problem.

Katharine Murphy [00:55:24] No. Well, that's right. That's right. So anything it's sort of like anything that you do in this area has sort of other effects and. Yeah, and part of the reason in a way, the energy market is in such a state, notwithstanding the global energy shock, which is the lion's share of the problem right at the moment. But, you know, we've had this history of absurd interventions in the energy market for the best part of a decade because we couldn't have a perfectly functioning carbon price. Yeah. So the more you intervene, the more adverse consequences you can build up down the track, which I think the Government has front of mind that obviously they got a short term problem that they have to address. So look, I think the latest on this, the Prime Minister did an interview from his sickbed in Kirribilli with Virginia Trioli in the ABC in Melbourne this morning. He said look, we'll, we'll go again national cabinet on Friday but that people need not worry in terms of the delay because what we're planning in terms of a new default market for electricity that that that wouldn't happen until February anyway was Albanese's launch this morning. But yeah so where they're going price caps on on coal and gas obviously temporary price caps to Abe's point and also, you know, sort of turning the code of conduct for the gas industry from a voluntary agreement to a mandatory one. Yeah, that's sort of the latest that we're looking at. But the premiers have all been doing what premiers do, which is try to maximise their own bargaining position in this quite fraught transaction for the Government. Obviously we see announced Annastacia Palaszczuk and do that most forcefully and echoed slightly in New South Wales. The PM thinks he will get the premiers there. I assume it involves a bucket of money to some degree because that's the big story and we'll just have to see how it all fits together sort of by the end of this week and into next week.

Ebony Bennett [00:57:30] Yeah, I thought I had more time but only got 3 minutes left. So very quickly I did have there was a question around Alba's upbringing, public housing and how we might expect that to have a greater emphasis on for Labour on that. But also I was

interested in a question around all those media strategies and Labour's tactics, especially towards the Murdoch media during the campaign. So I don't know if you can quickly.

Katharine Murphy [00:57:59] Go and I'll do it as quickly as I can. In terms of the welfare question, I assume the question is concerned about the gap between rhetoric and reality and so on.

Ebony Bennett [00:58:08] The housing crisis.

Katharine Murphy [00:58:09] Housing crisis like well, you know, it's all very well for Anthony Albanese to grow up poor. Will he actually do anything for poor people? Yeah. Reasonable question. And the answer is face probably as far as I can see looking at it maybe. So let's just see how that translates in terms of the other question, which was dealing with the Murdoch story campaign, dealing with the Murdoch press. Well, I think look, I think Eddie Albanese honestly wanted to send us all off to say by the end of the campaign, I think it was not just the Murdoch media. I think he was hardly sick of all of us, frankly. And we all got a bit of a hiding in the Labour campaign review for being superficial and ridiculous. So this that in terms of the Murdoch press, obviously he's had Kevin Rudd about the place calling for royal commissions and so forth and that has some purchase amongst the tales in the Greens in the Parliament, Anthony Albanese has chosen not to step over that barbed wire fence at this point in time for obvious reasons. I think he is hoping that he can use a solid opening in this first six months of the government to just assert a bit of authority, prime ministerial authority. So things are not quite so nuts all the time. Good luck with that, Katharine Murphy says to him. But because the reason things are crazy, it's like obviously, you know, the whole kind of Murdoch framing is bad. It is bad for democracy on a number of levels. But there's a reason why, you know, as a media, as a circus. And crazy, and it's beyond who owns the media at this point in time. That's a whole other conversation and possibly doesn't get to the nub of the thing. I think that the short answer is, I think he hopes persuasion will get him a decent it will get get him a fair and decent treatment, not adulation, but just decent treatment. Fair, accurate treatment. Seems a little bit naive to me, but anyway, we'll see.

Ebony Bennett [01:00:10] Hmm. Well, I'm afraid that's all we've got time for. Thank you so much, Katharine, for joining us in the studio today. Thank you, all of you, for tuning in. You can follow Katharine Atmospheric on Twitter. You can find me at Ebony Underscore Bennett. You can get a recording of today's webinar on our YouTube channel, Australia Institute, Court TV later today. And we'll also try and put this up as I think a podcast on our summer series over the summer quarterly essay Lone Wolf Anthony Albanese and the New Politics by Katharine Murphy is in all good bookstores and newsagents. And don't forget, we've got a special deal for supporters that Mahendra has put in the chat there for you. If you want just a few bucks off to order it to get it straight to your letterbox. Thank you for tuning in. That is all for 2022.

*Transcript: QE Lone Wolf: Albanese and the New Politics
with Katharine Murphy*

Recorded live on 6/12/22

Please note this transcript is automated

Katharine Murphy [01:01:02] And I'm still alive.

Ebony Bennett [01:01:04] We're both still alive and kicking. Very much looking forward to the summer holidays. Have a great summer break. We hope all of you get a rest as well. Take care of yourselves and we will see you in 2023 by.