# Dead Centre: How political pragmatism is killing us

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Democracy thrives on high expectations and starves on a diet of cynicism. But for decades the lowest common denominator of "centrism" has stifled serious debate about what kind of country we want to be and how best to get there. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet our health, education and public transport systems are a pale imitation of what many Europeans enjoy. We are the second largest energy exporter in the world, but while the Saudis, Qataris and Norwegians get rich when world energy prices surge, we watch our power and petrol bills soar and our elected leaders pretend there is nothing they can do to help. We are the twelfth largest economy in the world and claim to be punching above our weight on the world stage when in reality we are barely raising a glove. Maybe Australians are happy with the way things are, but I suspect not.

The endless centrist droning about the need for tax reform and a productivity agenda stifles

genuine debate about what Australians want more of, what we want less of, and how to redesign our system of taxes, subsidies and publicly provided services in ways that would deliver happier, healthier and richer lives for the vast majority of us. Rather than actively participate in democratic debates about whether we should have a health system that is more like that of the US or Norway, most Australians have been bored into silence by the endless technocratic econobabble about fiscal sustainability and effective marginal tax rates when the truth is Australia can easily afford to have the nice things they have in Europe.

Labor's recent landslide victory in the lower house, combined with the majority it can form with the ten Greens senators whenever they agree in the upper house, means there is simply no progressive reform the prime minister can get through his own party room that the Coalition can veto. The 2025 election result provides the Albanese Government with the opportunity to be either the most progressive parliament in modern history, the dampest of squibs, or the centre of the centrists. The choice is Labor's.

John Howard never gave Labor a veto of his reforms and in turn he did whatever he needed,

including radically amending his GST plan to get it through the Senate. He bribed Senator Mal Colston to quit the Labor Party and sit as an independent. The price was providing Liberal support for Colston's nomination for the well-paid position of Deputy President of the Senate, and the legislative dividend for Howard was Colston's vote to privatise Telstra.

Likewise, when Anthony Albanese was serious about reform, as he was with industrial relations in his first term, he was happy to cut a deal with the Greens. Indeed, the idea that Labor would have waited for bipartisan support from the Liberals before delivering the "Secure Jobs, Better Pay" or "Closing Loopholes" bills is simply absurd. But when it came to environmental policy, climate policy, electoral reform and the powers of the promised corruption watchdog Labor was happy to let the Liberals veto Labor's ambitions. In those instances, it was Labor's preference for dealing with the Liberals that led to watered-down legislation.

No major party MP gets preselected, elected, promoted to cabinet or installed in the top job without knowing how to count votes in their branch, their electorate and their party room.

Knowing the voting rules and knowing how to count the votes *is* the job. And every prime minister knows that an ugly win is still a win. The single vote that made Tony Abbott opposition leader in 2009 did nothing to diminish the impact he went on to have.

And all prime ministers know how to look like they are trying. Like a call-centre worker claiming that your call is important to them, all professional politicians can say they are hard at work on their publicly stated priorities while doing nothing to actually deliver on them. Most people understand that bold speeches, summits and inquiries can conceal a lack of ambition behind a cloak of activity. But few people realise that introducing legislation to parliament, legislation designed in such a way that it will not pass through the Senate, is the secret weapon of Australian politics. Used well, such strategically drafted legislation, sometimes called "bluff bills", can convince the whole country that a government is desperate to do something that it would rather leave undone.

The best bluff bills are designed to make the government seem centrist and paint their opponents as extreme. It is easy for outsiders

to confuse the willingness of a government to introduce legislation to parliament with their determination to fight for an actual outcome. The key skill of university debaters is to sound like they care about the case they are making, and our parliament is full of former university debaters.

No one negotiating a free trade agreement, an enterprise agreement, or even the purchase of a second-hand car expects their first offer to be accepted. Likewise, any government that drops a piece of legislation into parliament and says "respect my mandate" isn't serious about driving change. Like gorillas thumping their chests in lieu of a real fight, governments often thump their tables and shout "mandate" in lieu of engaging with the Senate as our Constitution demands.

Labor has become particularly skilled at playing "the game of per cents", drafting legislation that focuses debate on arbitrary percentage targets (or sometimes amounts of expenditure) which are designed at the outset to draw criticism from the Greens on the basis that Labor is not doing enough and from the Coalition arguing Labor is going too far. Having used their arbitrary targets to extract the desired response from

their parliamentary opponents, Labor is then free to claim that, like Goldilocks sampling porridge in the three bears' house, their arbitrary policy settings must be just right in the sensible centre. Such a strategy delivers good optics, but it delivers little reform.

While the media tends to applaud any advocate arguing they are in the sensible centre, perhaps because the business model of much of the legacy media was to be inoffensive to a broad audience to maximise advertising revenue, what rarely attracts attention in the acres of Australian political analysis is how arbitrary the definition of centrism is. Indeed, the concepts of left and right are fundamentally inadequate when addressing the biggest issues facing modern democracies. Why, for example, are right-wing European parties more ambitious than the ALP on climate? And since when did freedom of speech and transparency around government spending become left-wing issues?

The media's silence on the contradiction between the pursuit of centrism and the pursuit of evidence-based policy is even more jarring. For example:

- If evidence overwhelmingly suggests mandatory sentencing of children is a bad idea, then is it centrist for Labor to ignore that evidence and support mandatory detention of children on the basis that the Greens are opposed to it and the Coalition want even tougher mandatory sentences than Labor?
- If the scientific evidence says building new gas and coal projects is harmful for the climate then is it centrist for Labor to ignore that evidence and support new gas and coal projects because the Greens are opposed to them and the Coalition promise to approve them even faster?
- If evidence shows increases in domestic violence and inequality result from problem gambling, then is it centrist to put off changing legislation around gambling advertising because there is a forthcoming election?

While it is rarely discussed, the legacy media's interest in evidence-based policy only exists in a narrow range of circumstances, primarily situations in which powerful groups are pushing

the evidence. For example, when the Business Council of Australia use modelling to show tax cuts for their members would deliver economic benefits in the future, policymakers take them far more seriously than when public health professionals provide evidence that greater investment in preventative health will deliver long-run benefits to the same economy. Economic modelling, and the way the media covers it, is a great way to make political power more palatable by dressing up self-interest as national interest.

Regardless of the views of the current generation of politicians, or of the views of those in other powerful positions that the legacy media defers to, scientific evidence simply doesn't respect the arbitrary positions that political parties temporarily adopt. Labor understands this, which is why they acted on the science (and the urging of the CFMEU) to ban artificial stone benchtops based on the risk to worker health. In that instance Labor didn't set a benchtop reduction target or develop a benchtop transition plan. Perhaps most significantly, Labor did not depict calls for a ban, based on science and disruptive to those who profit from selling benchtops, as extreme. Labor also demonstrated its willingness

and ability to act decisively — and in the face of industry opposition — in their support for a social-media ban for kids under 16 during the last parliament. Likewise, in the past Labor has supported bans on asbestos and whaling. Would a party that celebrates centrism make the same decisions today?

Commentators often ask about "evidence" for policy decisions without reflecting on the fact that evidence clearly matters more in some cases (benchtops) than in others (mandatory sentencing of children). Why is it that evidence matters in some cases but not others? The most obvious answer, that evidence only matters when groups with political power aren't threatened by it, is too cynical for most centrists to abide. Without that answer, how else could you explain gas and coal expansion, gas and coal subsidies or the hesitancy to implement a ban on gambling advertising? How do centrists explain why no amount of scientific evidence or public support for such changes has ever led the legacy media to call the legacy political parties extreme in their determination to resist popular, evidence-based change?

Given the faith that centrists themselves like to place in evidence-based policy perhaps it is just

too painful for them to admit that those with real power get to decide when our policy processes pretend to care about evidence, and when we are forced to ignore it. The ultimate irony for proponents of evidence-based policy is that there is no evidence in Australia that evidence ever defeats political power when it is time for hard choices to be made. And the ultimate manifestation of political power in Australia is the ability to get both major parties to agree that some questions, and some answers, are simply too extreme to be taken seriously, even in the face of scientific consensus. While it may be comforting to believe that if only a minister understood the evidence of harm from gambling, gas expansion or locking up children that policy change would be inevitable; such magical thinking distracts those who are serious about driving change from the hard democratic work of putting even more pressure on ministers than politically successful industries do.

# The big bluff

We are all shaped by our experiences. As a rule, I don't rely on private conversations to support my public conclusions, but in this instance, I think it will be helpful to recount one anonymised conversation I had with a Howard Government minister back when I was Chief of Staff to the then leader of the Australian Democrats, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja.

At the time the Democrats held nine Senate seats and the balance of power in the Senate, meaning that if the Howard Government wanted to make a new law and Labor was opposed to that law then it was the Democrats who decided whether, and in what amended form, such a law would pass the Senate.

One night I met with a senior Howard minister to discuss a piece of forthcoming legislation. A "draft bill", as they are known, had yet to be circulated but the government had signalled its

legislative intentions and it was, for the government, safe to assume the Democrats would, like Labor, oppose the proposed legislation.

Which is precisely what made the late-night meeting interesting.

After dispensing with the usual pleasantries of gossiping about other parties and probing for intel about unrelated matters we got down to business. The cabinet minister handed me a draft bill on letterhead and said, "You guys are going to hate this bill. We obviously want you to vote for it as is … but I reckon a clever man like you would be able to come up with a range of amendments that my party could live with."

The minister then handed me second pile of papers, printed on plain paper with no coat of arms at the top, which listed a raft of amendments designed by the minister to significantly water down his own legislation.

We shared a laugh about the likely reaction from some of the members of his own party if they had been in the room with us that night. I suggested that while the amendments he proposed were a step in the right direction, I couldn't be sure that the Democrats would support the bill, even in amended form, and that

I would likely come up with some more ambitious amendments myself.

Formalities finished for the night, the minister performatively reiterated that his party was determined to see the bill pass in its original form and assured me that the Coalition would fight hard against any amendments. I told him I looked forward to the lengthy battle to improve his bill. The meeting concluded with our shared assessment that the ideological obsessions of some in his party had a galvanising benefit for both the Democrats and the Coalition.

The minister's original bluff bill, a proposal he knew would never pass the Senate, gave both parties something to keep their party rooms, and their voters, focused on and agitated by. The careful drafting of a piece of legislation designed from the outset to never pass the parliament would provide months of good media coverage for both the Liberals and the Democrats, coverage which would send a clear message to both parties' potential voters about how hard each party was fighting for its principles. Unsurprisingly, the bill never passed.

Politics is not what it looks like on the news.

Prime ministers know much better than you

or I how many options they have to create the appearance of activity and determination necessary to manipulate their backbench, stakeholders and voters alike into thinking they are fighting the good fight while promising powerful groups that they have no need to fear any change.

# A bad map can be worse than no map

*"A bad map is worse than no map at all for it engendered in the traveler a false confidence and might easily cause him to set aside these instincts which would otherwise guide him if he would but place himself in their care."*
*Cormac McCarthy* — The Crossing

Like an old street directory, the left/right/centre map of Australian politics is dated, disorienting and dangerously incomplete. Just as suburbs now sit where farms were just 30 years ago, the traditional map of Australian politics is more likely to cause confusion than clarity, especially for the 12.5 million people who have moved to Australia or turned 18 since John Howard beat Paul Keating in 1996. Our country, and the issues it faces, have changed radically

since then, but the map those who analyse our politics most commonly use still harks back to a Hawke-Keating era that few voting Australians experienced and even fewer care about.

The search for the sensible centre of Australian politics is as proud and pointless as the colonial search for the great inland sea: smart people claiming a noble cause pressing on while ignoring all the evidence around them and distracting Australians from the real options staring them in the face.

The belief that there are clear lines between left- and right-wing people and issues is built into the way most commentators describe Australia's democracy. We talk about a pendulum swinging between left and right. We make one third of the votes cast disappear by converting them into an artificial two-party preferred vote. And the ABC insists on presenting just two sides of arguments even when there are three or four. Indeed, when it comes to climate science the ABC insists on presenting two sides when there is only one.

Of course, there are times when the idea of left and right provides a powerful, if limited, lens through which to understand Australian policy and political debates. But the idea that it is left

wing to oppose public funding of nuclear power and right wing to provide free gas to foreign gas companies has no basis in philosophy, history, economics or anything else.

Unsurprisingly, the left/right/centre framework is at its most useful when examining issues that led to the formation of Australia's political parties in the first place; worker rights, the taxation of capital and the provision of services to citizens all lend themselves to analysis along a left/right spectrum. While the term "left wing" originally described those Republican members of the French National Assembly who sat on the left of the chamber, while supporters of the monarchy sat on the right, in Australia the term has generally been applied to parties supporting the rights of workers to strike for better pay, greater reliance on the collection of taxes on capital, and greater public expenditure on essential services. "Centrism" is the idea that neither left nor right ideologies are correct and that aiming for a middle road is the best option. But as this essay shows, there simply is no centrist option in many of the most critical debates in contemporary Australian politics. Likewise, this essay argues that the search for centrist compromise can be

weaponised by those hoping to keep things just as they are.

Historically, the binary of the left/right spectrum played an important part in Australian politics. In 1891 the Labor Electoral League in New South Wales became the first Labor party elected to a parliament in the world. In response, Menzies formed the Liberal Party out of grab-bag group of non-Labor parties containing adherents of protectionism, free trade and the prevailing Keynesian way of thinking. The Liberal Party really was a broad church back then.

As a result of that history there have been two sides in Australian parliaments for a long time. But Australia's long tradition of having two major parties, defined largely in opposition to each other, does not mean there is an inherent logic behind which party happens to support an individual's right to have an abortion, marry the adult of their choosing, or the right to have access to fresh air or clean water.[1] The consequence of this is that if there is no clear division of contemporary issues on the left/right spectrum then there simply is no meaningful centre.

Bad maps don't just disorient, they define the territory in ways that conceal rather than

reveal. They keep us looking down at old debates rather than looking up to observe what is really going on around us. By obsessing over centrism and using an outdated map, we stifle discussion of many of the biggest questions our democracy needs to address, and we ignore a wide range of possible solutions.

Australia is one of the richest countries in the world and, even after adjusting for inflation, our annual GDP has grown by 253 per cent since Bob Hawke was elected in 1983. Yet we regularly hear that we still can't afford to have the nice things we once took for granted. In the 1930s, in the midst of the Depression, Australian governments were building beautiful ocean baths that we swim in today, for free! But somehow the sensible centre has convinced us that the only way we can afford a nice pool today is for governments to go into a public–private consortium with an investment bank and a superannuation fund and, obviously, charge a fee to swim in it so that the super fund can generate 10 per cent returns forever more. Neoliberalism's best trick was to make the residents of a rich country feel poor.

Why don't we feel rich when the world price of our energy exports soar?

Why do we have to be one of the lowest tax countries in the developed world?

To ask such questions is to place yourself outside of the sensible centre of Australian public debate. But anyone with access to the internet can see that other sensible countries have made radically different decisions from our own, and as a result, other countries have radically different societies to ours, often with free childcare, no private school fees and no private health insurance.

Imagine if we didn't give more than half the gas we export away for free and chose to provide free childcare and free healthcare as a solution to a "cost of living crisis". While other countries do exactly that, in Australia it is impolite, simplistic or even naïve to point out that Norway heavily taxes their fossil fuel industry and gives their kids free higher education while in Australia we subsidise our fossil fuel industry and charge our kids a fortune to go to university. Some have argued that it is easy for Norway to tax their fossil fuel industry because there is bipartisan support for doing so!

# Fitting in

Just because everyone is doing something doesn't make it right. If Australia had a whaling industry and there was bipartisan support for it as a job creator, would it be centrist to support whaling? Does bipartisan political support for whaling in Japan make it a good idea? What would an Australian centrist who moved to Japan think is right?

When I was a kid, I often tried to excuse my poor decision-making by pointing out that I'd simply done what all my friends were doing. My mum's standard response was to ask me if I would stick my head in an oven if all my friends were doing that too. That's why I've never been a centrist; my mum, a lifelong Liberal voter, taught me not just to think for myself, but that it was dangerous to simply follow the thinking of others, including (to her endless political frustration) her own.

For many Australians, fitting in with those currently in power is far more important than frank and fearless advice. The price many in Australia are willing to pay to gain access to those we have placed in charge is the promise *not* to speak truth to power. A prime minister grants privileges by giving a one-on-one media interview, appointing someone chief scientist or departmental secretary. But those privileges aren't handed out randomly, or lightly, and they invariably go to those with a safe pair of centrist hands. No journalist with close access to Anthony Albanese has asked if he regrets founding, or leaving, the Parliamentary Friends of Palestine. It would be impolite to call Anthony Albanese a climate-change sceptic or a science denier. He knows that, and so does every journalist in Australia. But what no one knows is what to call a prime minister who supports politically easy climate policies (such as renewable energy subsidies) but ignores hard ones (such as stopping the construction of brand-new gas and coal mines in areas that have never produced gas or coal). In Australia we tend to call someone like Anthony Albanese, who chooses to rely on climate science sometimes but ignores it at others, a centrist. It's a lot more polite.

Likewise, when one former chief scientist was questioned about what advice he gave the government about the dangers of opening new gas and coal mines to power Australian industry, he simply replied, "I was never asked".[2]

Centrism means fitting in. And fitting in means never making those in power look silly. Who cares that AUKUS became policy without parliamentary approval? It's done now, and centrists can't stand their ground once the centre shifts because their ground is defined by the decisions of others. The centre of politics can no more be found on a map than the centre of music can be found by flicking between radio stations.

The desperation of so many people to fit in with whatever is deemed centrist today would be sad if the consequences weren't so serious. When those with the ability, arguably the responsibility, to speak truth to power remain strategically silent, bad things happen. Bad actors find refuge. Bad policies become law. And bad deeds go unpunished. The costs are not just counted in the tens of billions of dollars, but by the loss of faith in our institutions, and indeed in democracy itself. In the most egregious cases, such as Robodebt, the costs are counted

in human lives lost. We must remember that the first person charged for the war crimes committed by Australian soldiers is the whistleblower who alerted us to them.

# Meaningless middle

Centrism sounds a lot nicer than extremism but to me supporting Nelson Mandela sounds a lot nicer than supporting apartheid. And supporting a science-based approach to climate change sounds a lot more sensible to me than supporting fossil fuel expansion because, like whaling and asbestos mining, there's some jobs in it. But to each their own. There is nothing in the Constitution that says we need to base our laws on being nice or listening to science.

Centrism isn't a philosophy, ideology or even a coherent approach to policy development. It is simply the willingness to let others define the breadth of what is politically acceptable and to choose from a policy menu written by those in power. Centrism makes democratic sense when trying to balance some irreconcilable conflicting desires; for example, some people want to ban loud motorbikes completely and some want to

make their motorbikes even louder, so our elected representatives tend towards an arbitrary noise limit (centrism) rather than adopt an (extreme) ban or allow total freedom for individuals to make as much noise pollution as they want. Even though there is no right decibel limit for motorbikes, we can have a sensible debate about compromising on such things.

Should workers have unlimited rights to strike whenever they want over whatever they want? Or should strikes be illegal? Or should a democracy develop a centrist position on when it's okay to strike and when it's not? Most democratic countries have opted for somewhere in the middle, but few Australians likely realise that our laws make strike action far harder than in any other democratic country.[3] Would a change in our right to strike laws that took us closer to OECD norms be centrist or extremist?

But while the centrist instinct to compromise makes some sense for some issues, it is meaningless for many of the big questions democracies face.

What is the centrist position on slavery? Or abortion? How many jobs would whaling need to create before it became centrist again? Or slavery?

If centrism is your goal, then the key questions should surely be:

- Who defines the boundaries of where sensible options end and extreme ones begin? And;
- What is a centrist to do when those with power adopt more extreme positions? If power shifts its position do centrists have to follow?

Indeed, if parties such as Labor and organisations such as the ABC set centrism as their target, wouldn't that encourage parties such as the Greens, One Nation or even the Liberal Party to adopt more extreme positions in order to drag the sensible centre their way? Doesn't centrism reward extremism? Looking at the past 15 years, it seems that is exactly what the Coalition was doing as they steadily hardened their opposition to science-based climate policy, even as the scientific conclusions, and public support, strengthened.

## No more safe seats

The pursuit of centrism has clearly left a lot of voters feeling poorly represented by the two major parties whose combined primary vote has trended steadily downwards for decades. Indeed, as discussed below, in 2025 Labor's record number of seats in the lower house came off the back of its second lowest primary vote since World War II.

Back in 2022 few thought it possible, especially those in the press gallery and the Liberal Party, for first-time independent candidates to win the safest Liberal seats in the country. But having lost six of their so-called "blue ribbon" seats to independents, including Mackellar which was held by Jason Falinski with a margin of 13.2 per cent on the old electoral pendulum, the common-sense view shifted quite quickly.

Falinski clearly learnt from his experience. Despite his large electoral margin, the former

Liberal frontbencher and former president of the NSW Liberal Party who lost to Dr Sophie Scamps, now believes the Liberal Party does not need to "focus on left or right", because most Australians do not "think along that sort of ideological spectrum".[4]

Similarly, in his post-election speech to the National Press Club, ALP National Secretary Paul Erickson highlighted how close independents came to winning the once-safe Labor seats of Bean in the ACT and Fremantle in Western Australia, even though there was a nationwide swing to Labor. These seats demonstrate how the political terrain in Australia is changing with Erickson agreeing that there is now no such thing as a safe seat.

The 2025 election not only reinforced the new reality that no seats are safe against the right candidate challenging an incumbent on the right issues, it also showed that the metaphorical pendulum, just like the grandfather clocks that once relied on them, is now out of date and little more than an historical curiosity. For decades the idea that there was a pendulum that represented the national mood which in turn gently knocked over marginal seats but rarely swung far enough

to threaten safe seats has defined most pre-election and election night analysis. But as anyone who has watched Antony Green struggle to comprehend, let alone explain to viewers, what was happening in so-called "three-cornered contests" would know, Australian elections just aren't tidy anymore. If there ever was a pendulum, it is now better thought of as a wrecking ball, swinging in three dimensions rather than two and by turns knocking over safe and marginal seats, threatening all parties from all directions all at once.

The sustained surge in support for independents and minor parties over the past 40 years, and the steady decline in the primary vote of the major parties during the same period, reinforce the usefulness of the wrecking ball metaphor. Once upon a time the major parties typically won so-called "marginal seats" off each other, and almost never won or lost safe seats. But in recent times independent MPs have been more likely to win so-called safe seats than to win the classic marginals that the major parties fought endlessly over. One reason why the community independents have been so disruptive to politics as usual is the *type* of seats they have won, not just the number.

Once upon a time frontbench MPs in so-called safe seats had little to fear during elections. Just as generals rarely die in wars, up-and-coming leaders rarely lost their seats in parliament. But, as Tony Abbott, Josh Frydenberg and Jason Falinski found out, that's just not the case anymore. Since 2001, 82 per cent of all the seats that have changed hands and been won by major party candidates were seats defined by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) as marginal. By contrast, 79 per cent of the seats taken by minor party or independent candidates were defined by the AEC as safe or fairly safe seats.

While Labor won (or the Liberals lost) a record haul of seats in 2025, a closer look at the results shows how vulnerable, from multiple directions, many Labor seats now are. For example, Labor nearly lost some of its safest seats, such as Fremantle in Western Australia and the ACT seat of Bean to independents. And while they won Melbourne, Brisbane and Griffith from the Greens, they nearly lost Wills to the Greens who had swings to them in Wills, Richmond and a range of other lower house seats. Likewise, Labor beat the Liberals to win Bullwinkel in Western Australia with

a margin of just 0.51 per cent. So should Labor defend itself against the Greens, independents or Liberals at the next election? While the old pendulum provided certainty, modern politics means Labor cannot simply shift to the left or right, and as the results in Bean and Fremantle make clear, they cannot afford to ignore the views of voters in what were once called safe seats. The last two elections have shown that no seat is safe from the right candidate running on the right issues.

The Liberals narrowly won the seat of Goldstein by 0.08 per cent, or around 175 votes, and lost the seat of Bradfield by 26 votes, both against independents focused on climate action. They lost to Labor in Bullwinkel by just 1,000. So, should they attack them for going too far on climate in order to win back "outer suburban seats" or should the Liberals attack Labor for approving too many fossil fuel projects in an attempt to win back Bradfield and hold Goldstein? Tim Wilson is going to have to make some hard choices about whether to listen to his voters or his friends in the fossil fuel industry if he wants to keep one of the most marginal seats in the country, but many of his National Party colleagues fear losing their seats to

Pauline Hanson's One Nation if they don't loudly proclaim their climate scepticism.

According to newly installed Liberal Leader Sussan Ley, "We will have a red-hot go at every seat that we don't hold at the next election — the teals, Labor marginals, inner suburban, outer suburban." While such a shotgun approach would seem to need some refinement, she is certainly right to avoid any strategy based on the smooth sweep of an imagined pendulum to identify her party's target seats.

The electoral pendulum is now of virtually no analytical use for understanding political strategy. At the end of this term of parliament, if a few thousand voters in a few dozen seats shift their votes then both the Labor and Liberal parties could lose seemingly safe seats to independents, minor parties or to each other. Indeed, now that the Liberal Party primary vote is at a record low of 28 per cent (including the LNP in Queensland and the CLP in the Northern Territory) and Labor's 2025 primary of 34.6 per cent only narrowly surpassed their 2022 nadir of 32.6 per cent, even small shifts in which candidates come second, third or even fourth in 2028 will have big impacts on who goes on to win

seats in safe and marginal electorates alike. To be fair, it's not just rusted on election-watchers who find the role of third and fourth placed candidates confusing, but regardless of how confusing the commentariat find close contests between multiple candidates, the AEC knows how to count them, even if it takes more than three weeks in close races like Calwell, Bradfield and Goldstein. Close counts taking weeks to finalise might ruin the theatre for celebrity psephologists on election night, but they are the clearest proof that no matter where we live, all our votes are important, and thanks to preferential voting, no votes can ever be wasted.

But while few understand how the electoral pendulum is calculated, and even fewer understand its implications, the media's preferred electoral indicator — the "two-party preferred vote", or 2PP — conceals the most significant trends occurring in Australian politics. By design, the two-party preferred indicator treats all votes for minor parties and independents as if they were simply truck stops on the way to the final destination of electing a major party MP. And of course, bad maps lead to bad navigation.

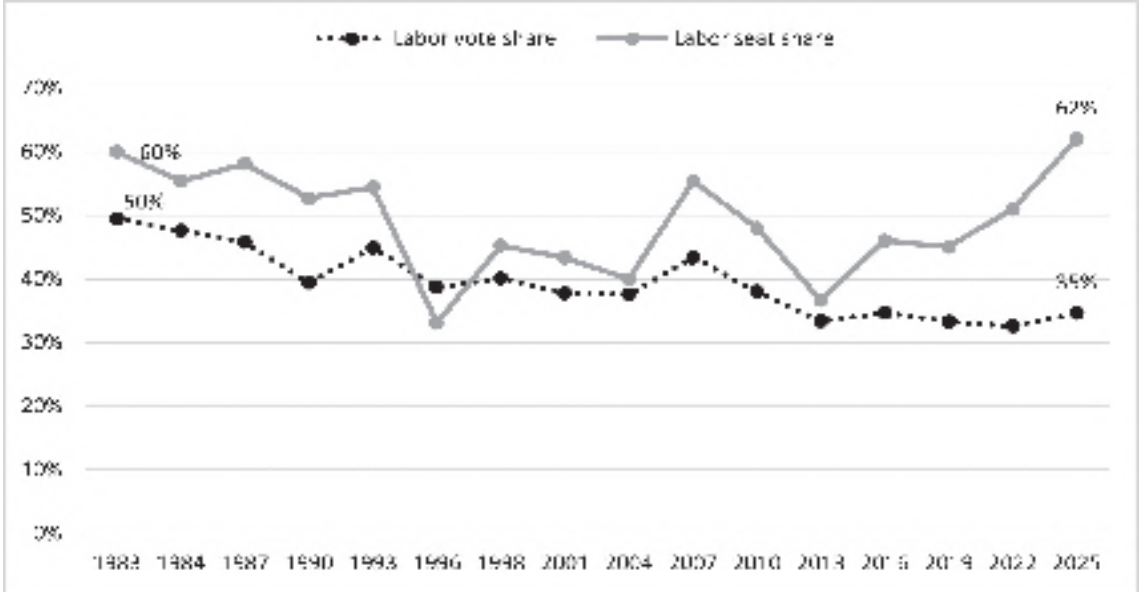
It is true that when the record number of

votes for the Greens, other minor parties and independents are allocated to the two major parties (even in seats the major parties lost) to create the 2PP, the Labor Party 2PP is among its highest ever. But in reality, while Bob Hawke's Labor attracted 49.5 per cent of the first preference votes cast in 1983, and Kevin Rudd won 43.4 per cent in 2007, Anthony Albanese's triumphant victory was based on a nationwide primary vote of just 34.6 per cent. Indeed, Albanese's record share of lower house seats distracts from the fact that the primary vote swing to Labor is less than half that achieved under Bill Hayden (1980), Bob Hawke (1983), Paul Keating (1993) or Kevin Rudd (2007).

There has been a steady decline in Labor's primary vote, compensated for by an increased reliance on the preferences of those voters who, by definition, would prefer to have a minor party or independent MP represent them but will settle for Labor over the Coalition. As shown in the figure below, in 2025 Anthony Albanese won a record high percentage of lower house seats off a near record low primary vote.

Put simply, in 2019 Bill Shorten won a larger percentage of the primary vote than Albanese,

Labor's first-preference vote compared to Labor's share of the seats in the House of Representatives, 1983 to 2025



but Albanese won more seats than any Labor leader since Curtin. Support for Labor is broad, but it is not deep.

Australian politics is changing faster than most political commentators can keep up with. The determination of independent MPs to insist that they aren't a party, the ability of the Greens to win and hold once-safe Liberal seats like Ryan, and the fact that there is no such thing as safe seats anymore all require a much more nuanced and humble analysis than the left/right/centre framing that has long dominated Australian political debate.

Now that neither the Liberal nor Labor party can afford to simply stay focused on each other anymore, lest their fight for traditional marginal seats cost them the once safest seats held by these most senior figures, and now that Labor, the Greens and progressive independents collectively hold 101 of the 150 seats in the lower house *and* a majority of the votes in the Senate, it is time to carefully consider what drives contemporary Australian politics and how that has changed. Australia clearly needs a new map to help navigate our rapidly changing political landscape.