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The Australian Labor Party's Campaign

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was widely expected to lose the 2016 federal election, and, true to the predictions, it did. However, the party greatly exceeded expectations and came tantalisingly close to securing office, after one term in opposition following the 2013 defeat. After a number of recounts in marginal seats, the Liberal–National Coalition secured just a single-seat victory. This chapter offers a critical overview of the ALP's campaign during the election. It sets out the broad contours of the party's campaign strategy, its policy agenda and its State-level campaign performance. The chapter concludes by locating the position of the ALP in a comparative context, especially with the wider decline and issues facing many centre-left parties in similar advanced industrial societies.

To evaluate Labor's performance in 2016, this chapter locates the ALP's results in the wider 'opposition' literature. There is a wide range of academic literature that seeks to explain the role and performance of opposition parties in different political regimes (Dahl 1966; Jaensch 1994; Jaensch, Brent and Bowden 2004; McAllister 2002; Schlesinger 1994). This literature offers insights into how oppositions can win office (e.g. Downs 1957: 137). Recent work by Tim Bale (2010), drawing upon the work of Stuart Ball (2005: 4–5), offers a sound framework for applying this to the case of the ALP in 2016. Bale (and Ball's) work focuses on the key factors

that can help explain why opposition parties can get elected. Using the case of the British Conservative Party, they identify five key factors that have a strong explanatory power for when the Tories win office. Briefly, these are (cited in Bale 2010: 4):

- *fresh faces*: a new leadership team
- *cohesion*: a sense of party discipline and unity
- *visibility*: a new agenda or distinctive policy program (and distancing from past unpopular policies)
- *efficiency*: an improved party organisation, and can respond with speed and authority
- *adaptability*: a hunger for office, coupled to a pragmatism that enables room to manoeuvre.

The utility of this approach is that it provides a broad framework that enables a critical evaluation of the ALP's campaign performance. It is also worth noting some limitations with this framework. There are clearly other factors that can shape electoral results—not least, incumbency. Yet, despite the current more 'accelerated' state of Australian democracy and its churn of prime ministers, most major parties will sit out at least two terms in opposition before getting re-elected (although there are notable recent State-level exceptions in Victoria (VIC) and Queensland (QLD)). Overall, the framework adapted by Bale and Ball can give us a useful critical prism through which to view how well the ALP campaigned under Bill Shorten in 2016.

The challenge and the results

In recent years, the high-water mark of Labor's electoral achievement was the 2007 election with Kevin Rudd as party leader. In 2007, after 11 years of opposition, Labor secured a resounding result, winning 43.38 per cent of first preferences and 83 seats. In terms of first preferences, this was Labor's strongest result since the 1993 federal election. Since the high-water mark of Rudd's 2007 win, the ALP's electoral performance has been a story of decline, and a well-documented one at that (Ferguson and Drum 2016; Kelly 2014). The Rudd–Gillard governments remain the key point of comparison for understanding Shorten's efforts to rebuild the party after the 2013 defeat. In 2013, the ALP was handsomely beaten and secured one of its lowest-ever first preference performances,

gaining just 33.38 per cent of the vote. It secured just 55 seats compared to the Coalition's 90. Labor lost 17 seats in the election, although there is solid evidence that Rudd's late instalment as leader stemmed an even more dramatic loss (Grattan 2013). Whatever the significant policy achievements of the Rudd–Gillard era, the party was widely perceived as shambolic and fatally divided (Garrett and Dick 2013).

Within three years, however, Shorten had emerged as a solid, if uncharismatic, leader. Moreover, he had largely unified the party (or at least been able to ensure the divisions were no longer played out in public), and he had built a solid policy agenda that largely built upon the Rudd–Gillard years. To win office, Labor needed to gain at least 21 seats. Realistically, most Labor insiders were hoping to regain 10–15 seats (Bramston 2016). As one senior Labor figure commented to the author, Labor's campaign in 2016 was largely an 'opposition' campaign.¹ Labor's focus was on shoring up its 'core vote', especially in marginal suburban areas like western Sydney. As outlined below, this meant that much of Labor's strategy was framed in terms of rebuilding traditional support bases, rather than offering a comprehensive program as a government-in-waiting.

Despite Labor's strong 2016 election performance, it is worth noting two key aspects to its campaign. First, despite the seat gains, the ALP's first preference count was just 34.73 per cent, which was a modest 1.35 per cent swing from the 2013 result. Crucially, the trend data for Labor's first preference vote is clearly tracking downward (see Figure 11.1). This weakened support did fuel some speculation that Anthony Albanese might rerun the leadership contest (Norington 2016).

A second, related issue was the unevenness of Labor's performance. Labor performed strongly in Tasmania (TAS) and crucial bellweather seats in Sydney's west, along with a solid showing in South Australia (SA). Yet, in VIC and QLD, the showing was less impressive and, indeed, there was some suggestion that VIC State Labor issues damaged Shorten's chance of winning office. Figure 11.2 outlines the variability in Labor's performance as indicated by first preferences across the States and Territories. The variability in performance is discussed in more detail below.

1 Some of the background information on the ALP's campaign comes from a series of anonymous informal interviews with a number of key, senior Labor figures, which took place from October–November 2016. I am grateful for their input, and any inaccuracies belong to the author.

DOUBLE DISILLUSION

Figure 11.1. ALP first preferences and two-party preferred vote, 1980–2016
Source. Constructed by author from Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) website.

Figure 11.2. ALP first preferences and swing, national and States, 2016
Source. Constructed by author from AEC website.

Labor's campaign

Political campaigning is a composite of different elements (Burton and Shea 2010; Mills 1986, 2014; Ross 2015). We might broadly categorise them into four dimensions: the policy debates, and the 'ground', 'air' and 'digital' campaigns.

Labor's election campaign was led by National Secretary George Wright, who had been in the post since 2011, and had overseen the previous campaign in 2013. Wright was candid in his appraisal of the previous campaign (2015: 206). Interestingly, he notes that the ALP is now shifting to a 'third generation' of campaigning, and aspects of this played out in 2016. Political campaigns are shifting away from blanket mass advertising (first generation) and demographic targeting (second generation) to a more granulated approach. As one interviewee reported, this was Labor's third campaign cycle with a strong 'data-driven' approach to targeting potential voters. As per previous campaigns, key seats were targeted, both those that Labor needed to 'hold', as well those it needed to gain. The campaign was driven by the central office, but each candidate in target seats had a campaign organiser to recruit and deliver 'on the ground'. At best, this worked well when there were clear links between the centre and the periphery. Generally speaking, the logistics of the campaigns in the key target seats were shaped by three key factors: the national policy settings, candidate factors and local context. Labor made gains and inroads when these three dimensions linked well. So, in Tasmania, the results reflected the prominence of the 'Mediscare' campaign, coupled with a backlash against the incumbent Liberal candidate(s), supplemented by local concerns about the state of medical services, including Launceston hospital (Ford 2016a).

Given the secretive nature of campaigning, it is difficult to gauge accurately the scale of the logistics of the parties' campaigns. Katherine Murphy (2016) provides some useful data, and notes that Labor recruited 15,000 volunteers—many of them at least a year beforehand. Moreover, the scale of the campaign was significant. Murphy suggests that eight weeks before the election there were 1.6 million voter contacts made. These comprised of 1 million phone calls, 560,000 door knocks and 450,000 conversations logged. In the 48 hours before the election, 62,000 phone calls were made in target seats.

This data-driven approach had been trialled in the Queensland and Victorian State elections, and in the 2015 Canning by-election (Reece 2014). It is worth noting that whilst the metrics are impressive, they conceal certain dynamics of Labor's campaign. For example, as one senior figure reported, whilst the national office would pass on the details of potential new recruits, there was a relatively high attrition rate. However, to counter this, Labor could rely on one of its key assets—the dynamism of Young Labor, the party's youth wing. Most often university

undergraduates, these volunteers were crucial in providing reliable and coordinated activist support. The data-driven approach itself remains closely guarded; however, broadly speaking, target voters were drawn from census data, the electoral roll, the party's own surveys, other sources and triangulated with the calls logged. As one senior figure acknowledged, one of the key strategies in targeting voters was for the party to ignore electoral boundaries and focus on key communities and demographic groups and areas.

Labor's campaign, it should also be noted, was supplemented and assisted by both the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and specific trade unions' campaigns. Murphy (2016) suggests that the ACTU claimed at least 50,000 people were contacted by them. The unions also targeted key seats, and whilst there was overlap with Labor's seats, there were differences. The suggestion was that in terms of targeting, the party's campaign was arguably more granulated. There appears to be loose coordination between the two, although this seems localised. For example, both groups were wary of door knocking the same streets at the same time. Another factor in Labor's strong Tasmanian performance was also the on-the-ground campaigning done by GetUp! (see Vromen, Chapter 18, this volume).

At the target-seat level, a key part of Labor's campaign was to neutralise the threat posed by Malcolm Turnbull's charisma. As one interviewee put it, the ALP did not want the campaign (in a key, marginally held Labor seat) as 'Malcolm Turnbull vs. [Our candidate]'. So the ALP campaign targeted the local Liberal challenger, who also conveniently handed the ALP a gaffe, which was used in both media and leaflet material—again in a key, marginally held metropolitan seat. Here, the ALP would play up the strength of the ALP candidate as either a 'safe pair of hands' or a 'fresh face' accordingly. In the final week of the 'ground campaign' Labor saw little value in blanket leafleting marginal suburbs, but through targeted contacts tried to secure 'values' conversations with potential Labor voters. Volunteers were strongly encouraged to rely on their own personal narratives, rather than 'cold call' on specific policies. This latter approach was seen to be a turn-off. Crucially, it was estimated by the party that approximately one in four target voters made up their minds only in the final 72 hours before election—and this was the crucial period for the ubiquitous 'robocalls'.

Arguably, whilst Labor's campaigning (like the Liberals') is growing more sophisticated, it still lags behind the US and the UK. To some extent, this is partly explained by the influence of compulsory voting, with overseas sister parties having a greater focus on 'getting out the vote'. Moreover, there was some scepticism evinced by some of these methods. As one interviewee who had been involved in a Democrat campaign in the US explained, they once wasted an afternoon trying to reach just nine houses in a swing US State and, in the event, no one was home in each case. Whilst the degree of data triangulation is granulated, Labor's ground campaign had a stronger mass impact.

It remains unclear how much was spent by Labor on its campaign, given the general lack of transparency surrounding campaign finance in Australia (Orr and Ward 2013). The 2013 election delivered just over \$20 million to Labor compared to the Coalition's \$23 million in public funding. The bulk of the campaign financing was spent on TV advertising. Clare Blumer and Dan Conifer (2016) suggest that by June, the Coalition had spent just over \$6 million to the ALP's \$4.7 million on TV advertising. The authors claim that Labor disproportionately spent more on 'negative' rather than 'positive' ads, with greater funds for the Mediscare ads over its '100 positive policies' message. This reinforces the overall 'messaging' of the ALP campaign and reflects the two key decisions that shaped the ALP campaign. First was the decision (taken very early) to set Labor's '100 positive policies'. To avoid the disruption of previous campaigns, the party wanted a more coherent and embedded policy agenda. In addition, the focus on policy was to lift the gaze from the leaders—and the threat of Turnbull's own personal charisma. Second, and perhaps more influential on the eventual campaign, was the relatively late decision by Wright to amplify the 'Mediscare' message (Farr 2016). Near the end of May, Wright showed some health policy experts the video of Bob Hawke accusing the Liberals of privatising Medicare. This was a 'catalyst' that Labor could use to demarcate itself from the government and, according to Malcolm Farr (2016), the strategy clearly 'unsettled' the Liberals.

Overall, despite the outcome, Labor's campaign seemed to have a fine balance of long-term planning, shrewd messaging and also fortunate short-term decision-making. Yet the campaign was not without its critics. Troy Bramston (2016) offered some stinging critique in the *Australian*. Bramston articulated a range of limitations in the campaign, but most notable was the decision to base the campaign headquarters not in NSW but in VIC, where only one of the 15 most marginal seats was located.

In addition, the major news outlets are based in Sydney, hereby ‘missing a trick’. On its media strategy, Bramston suggested that Labor did not do enough to localise issues and make better use of regional media outlets. He also suggested that the social media strategy was not smart enough at data mining. Further, there were criticisms that the party did not do enough to elicit donations from ‘new’ supporters. Other concerns included the unreliability of Labor’s own internal polling, the national office not doing enough ‘due diligence’ on its candidates, more funding needing to go to target seat campaigns and a lack of seasoned operatives. What seems clear is that, even if some of these criticisms may not be valid, the unevenness of Labor’s campaign was striking, despite its generally positive results.

Labor’s policy agenda

Underpinning Labor’s ‘ground’, ‘air’ and ‘digital’ campaigns was its policy agenda. A useful way to understand the ALP’s policy narrative is through David Bartlett and Jennifer Rayner’s (2014: 54–57) six campaign narratives. Despite new campaign innovations, the authors argue that the major parties tend to organise their campaign stories around either one (or a mix) of the following types:

- *new hope*: a narrative that seeks to foster hope and defeat voter cynicism. Voters are offered a vision of the future, or one of the past
- *time’s up*: commonly used by opposition parties, a story to ‘harness public dissatisfaction and whip it into a wave of antigovernment sentiment’
- *job isn’t done*: a plea by incumbents to remain in office to build upon policy achievements
- *experience vs. inexperience*: a story that emphasises the virtues of solid stable governance over unpredictable opponents
- *we’ve listened and learned*: this approach ‘primarily aims to rebuild political capital by a promising a break with ... unpopular policies’
- *fear*: a negative story designed to encourage a feeling of harm (if the opponent party is (re)elected).

By and large, the ALP’s campaign fused a number of these elements, but to varying degrees. To a very limited extent, there was some narrative espoused by Shorten that Labor would be a ‘new hope’, and the strategic

use of its '100 positive policies' agenda to suggest it had something like a 'vision' for the country. The ALP's mantra was 'Putting People First', which lacked the 'cut through' of the Liberals' 'Jobs and Growth' slogan. Shorten managed to win and secure three relatively high-risk policy debates. The first was the commitment to return the Budget to surplus in the same time frame as the Liberals, *but*, in the interim, Labor pledged they would run deeper deficits (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 2016). The second was the ALP's policy to restrict negative gearing to new housing from 1 July 2017. The third was to not match the Liberals cuts to company tax—in effect, enabling Labor to make \$50 billion in savings.

As outlined by Carol Johnson (Chapter 3, this volume), there was a return to the more ideological language of class that suffused Labor's campaign (Kelly 2016). In its 10-year plan, Labor explicitly evoked the language of social class (ALP 2016). Shorten, much more than Rudd, was fulsome in his praise of the role of the trade unions. This class-based approach had been slowly building under Shorten, and it was underpinned by an earlier report on inequality led by veteran Jenny Macklin (ALP 2015). Two issues are worth noting here. First, it reinforces the view that Labor's election campaign was built on earlier foundations. Second, this class agenda pushed the ALP back within a 'labourist' tradition (Johnson 2011), which also reinforced the view of the party's 'core vote' strategy.

At other points, and in more limited ways, the Labor campaign also spoke to other dimensions on the Bartlett and Rayner typology. There was a hint of the 'experience vs inexperience' narrative based on Labor's attacks on the Liberals' superannuation changes. There was clearly also a dose of 'we've listened and we've learned' in Labor's campaign, with a tighter campaign not damaged by crippling leaks and leadership problems as in 2013 and 2010.

Yet, Labor's main campaign narrative was one of 'fear'. As outlined by Amanda Elliot and Rob Manwaring (Chapter 24, this volume), the 'Medicare' campaign proved highly effective, sowing highly plausible doubt about the government's commitment to funding and investing in public goods—notably, health policy. Health, as Australian Electoral Study (AES) data show, is consistently a strong policy area for Labor (see Bean, Chapter 10, this volume). Moreover, it was a policy issue that could play out locally, with MPs and foot soldiers able to raise fears on local health services. The strength of this tactic was acknowledged by the Liberals. Former NSW Liberal leader Peter Collins argued (cited in Ford 2016b):

It's all about perception and what Labor aimed to do and I think did successfully in Lindsay at least and I suspect in other marginal seats was to take a broad national issue—the Medicare scare—and to localise it and say this affects your local hospital.

There was much debate as to whether or not Labor's 'Mediscare' campaign was misleading or not. Indeed, Turnbull argued that Labor's campaign was based on an 'extraordinary act of dishonesty' (Overington 2016). However, Shorten's case was built on strong, but circumstantial evidence (Henderson 2016). If privatisation is narrowly defined as purely the selling-off of state assets then Labor's scare campaign was based, at best, on mixed evidence. However, if privatisation is given a much broader meaning such as cost shifting onto the public, as Shorten outlined in his interview with Sarah Ferguson on *Four Corners*, then the case was much stronger (Ferguson, Stevens and Worthington 2016).

Overall, when evaluating Labor's policy agenda, and how it linked to its campaign, it was also striking that despite the claims for a new approach by Labor, these were policy settings best characterised as 'incremental' (Haigh 2012; Hayes 2001). By and large, much of Labor's agenda—especially its social policy agenda—was a continuation of the project developed by both Rudd and Gillard. Moreover, Shorten managed to achieve party discipline and cohesion well before the election campaign. At Labor's federal conference, pushed by the right-wing trade unions, Shorten offered a 'new direction' in Labor's immigration policy, controversially supporting boat turn backs and continuing offshore processing (Yaxley and Norman 2015). Similarly, Shorten secured a compromise over same-sex marriage—pledging to introduce a bill if elected—but MPs would be allowed a conscience vote until 2019 (Norman and Uhlmann 2015). Whilst unsatisfactory to the party's Left faction, Shorten's deft handling at the conference, backed by key trade unions, ensured that Labor had neutralised two key 'live' policy issues well before the start of the campaign.

Labor's regional campaigns

After broadly outlining the ALP's campaign and policy strategy, it is useful to highlight some of the local factors that either impeded or amplified the campaign. In NSW, Labor generally performed well, and picked up crucial seats like Lindsay and Macarthur, with swings of 4.1 per cent and 11.7 per cent respectively. More generally across the State, Labor gained

key marginal seats, such as the famous bellwether of Eden-Monaro. A range of factors seemed to play out here. First, the general toxicity of the Labor 'brand' across the State had diminished, especially some of the debilitating politics at the end of the State Labor era (Cavalier 2010; Clune 2012). Second, Labor was clearly able to exploit wider public anxiety about the Liberals' plan to deliver economic growth. The ALP deployed what the NSW Labor General Secretary, Kaila Murnain, called a 'shoe leather and social' campaign (cited in Evans 2016). Some systemic factors also helped Labor in the marginal seats; for example, the redistribution in Macarthur was kind, syphoning off a number of Liberal districts. Overall, Shorten described this as 'Fortress NSW' (Evans 2016).

Topping the NSW results was Labor's strong performance in Tasmania. Of the five seats, the Liberals lost three to Labor, Labor retained Franklin and Andrew Wilkie entrenched his position as an Independent in Denison. Labor easily claimed the seats of Bass, Braddon and Lyons. One factor seems to be that each of the three Liberal incumbents belonged to the conservative wing of the party, all supporting Tony Abbott against Turnbull (McIlroy 2016). Defeated member Andrew Nikolic complained that Labor's aggressive campaign strategy, meaning the widespread use of robocalls, was a factor. Labor was also, indirectly, assisted by the GetUp! campaign targeting conservative marginal seats (see Vromen, Chapter 18, this volume). Liberal frontbench Senator Eric Abetz claimed the campaign group spent '\$500,000 just in the seat of Bass, with 10 full-time people besmirching the character of a great Australian servant [Nikolic]' (Ford 2016b). In a further frank analysis, Abetz perceived a failure of the centrally orchestrated Liberal campaign to dovetail to local issues in Tasmania (Smith 2016).

In SA, the emergence of the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) had a clearer disproportionate impact on the Liberals, rather than Labor. Xenophon's shrewd targeting of Liberal MP Jamie Brigg in Mayo helped make the election competitive to the ALP's advantage. After a protracted count, Steve Georganas, former sitting member for Hindmarsh, regained his old seat from Liberal Matt Williams. Elsewhere, despite some scares, Kate Ellis held off another new challenger for the seat of Adelaide. The NXT phenomenon did pose a specific problem for Labor in SA, and it had to shape its strategy to neuter both NXT and the Coalition. Locally, there was a shrewd focus on the issue of penalty rates to try and damage both Xenophon and the Liberals. Perhaps, like in TAS, the strength of Labor's impact was arguably mostly due to the weakness of the Liberals'

campaign. Given the fiasco of the submarine deal, and with one of the largest unemployment rates in the country, it seemed clear that the Liberals had lost far too much ground to recover in the State.

In VIC and QLD, Labor's campaign had less impact. In VIC, the Liberals gained one seat from the ALP—Chisholm—with a modest swing to the government. There is a mixture of views about why Labor seemed to perform more poorly here, securing a 1.5 per cent swing, compared to the national 3.4 per cent. The more positive narrative from some Labor quarters was that Labor was already strong in VIC, and it had hit close to its threshold in the State (Gordon 2016). Yet, as noted, this might be rather kind, given that in 2010 Labor did secure a higher two-party preferred result (55 per cent in 2010, compared to 51.7 per cent in 2016). The main charge is that Labor lost ground due to Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews' decision to initiate a dispute involving the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the United Firefighters Union weeks before the date of the federal election. One commentator suggested that the CFA dispute had some impact, in that it 'deprived Bill Shorten of oxygen' (Gordon 2016; see also Peetz, Chapter 23, this volume).

Similarly, the ALP campaign in QLD did not perform as well when compared to the national picture. In total, the ALP retained six seats, and gained two: Herbert and Longman. This remains a blue State with 21 Liberal seats and Bob Katter retaining his seat. Whilst the Longman result was a highpoint for Labor, ejecting the youthful Wyatt Roy from office, elsewhere it made little substantive impact. In target seats, Labor focused on issues such as the misuse of 457 visas, and fears over foreign workers. Evan Moorhead, the ALP State Secretary, suggested that it faced institutional barriers as they were 'up against incumbents with big budgets' (Ludlow 2016). The QLD picture is complex, not least with the resurgence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation, the disappearance of Palmer United and a State that generally tends to swing erratically.

Conclusion: Labor through the telescope and the microscope

If we revisit the Ball–Bale framework set out at the outset of the chapter, we can make some overall judgements about the ALP's 2016 federal election campaign. First, on *fresh faces*, clearly Labor was able to offer something

like fresh leadership for the party, following the Rudd–Gillard years. Unlike Julia Gillard, Shorten had the advantage of not facing constant leaks and efforts to undermine his performance. There were two main positive elements to Shorten's leadership skills. First, he was backed up a strong shadow Cabinet, with Tanya Plibersek, Chris Bowen and Penny Wong amongst his finest performers. Shorten appears to play a 'team game', which helped distract from his lack of charisma or rhetorical skills. Second, the ALP, clearly recognising Shorten's limited personal appeal, took a policy-'rich' approach. On *fresh faces*—Shorten was just about able to convey sufficient distance from the leadership problems that beset the 2007–13 Labor governments.

On the dimension of *cohesion*, Shorten's noted negotiation skills came to the fore, and the party projected itself as unified and coherent. By neutralising key points of policy division, Shorten was able to broker key deals between the factions and unions, and galvanise union and party members for the 'ground war'.

Arguably, one of the weakest dimensions of Labor's campaign was *visibility*—in its ability to offer a new or distinctive policy agenda. Clearly, the furore around Medicare was prominent during the campaign. Yet, ultimately, this was an 'opposition' campaign, in that the party was largely directing its efforts to oppose and critique the government's agenda, with a mixed ability to offer a coherent new 'vision' for the nation. Whilst it was a strength for the party to continue many of the social policy settings set out during the Rudd–Gillard years, this had limitations. On its political economy, the *visibility* of its agenda was less clear. Interestingly, whilst Labor performed better than expected, it might well find that the challenge is even greater at the 2019 election, in that it may require more than incremental settings to secure victory.

On *efficiency* and *adaptability*, we can also see progress made by the ALP. Generally, the party worked well during the campaign, and it was a surprisingly gaffe-free campaign—almost to the point of boredom (see Gauja, Chen, Curtin and Pietsch, Chapter 1, this volume). More positively, it was very clear that the ALP was 'hungry' for office, and the Medicare campaign reflected a party that is never shy of playing negative or tough marginal seat politics to try and seal electoral gains.

The Bale–Ball framework gives us some clues with which to evaluate the ALP's campaign, and it scores reasonably well across most of these elements. If we locate the context of the Australian political system, then the scale

of the challenge facing Labor has to be acknowledged. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Australian political culture tends to allow new governments at least two terms to set out their program, especially at the federal level.

Finally, it is worth locating Labor's performance with a brief reflection on the wider, international context of the centre-left. In their account of trade unions, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman (2013) use the metaphor of the microscope and the telescope to evaluate the state of the union movement. The microscope examines the local factors that explain patterns and trends, and the telescope takes a broader view to evaluate the state of play. Much of this chapter has focused on the 'microscope'—especially in seeking to understand the unevenness of Labor's performance across the country. Yet, Labor in opposition can also be viewed through the telescope, by comparing its position to its international counterparts. Generally speaking, since the global financial crisis (GFC), the centre-left has been on the back foot across many advanced industrial nations. Crucially, there is a literature (e.g. Bailey et al. 2014; Keating and McCrone 2013) that argues that since the GFC, the centre-left has failed to capitalise on economic circumstances that might well have suited a revival of the centre-left. Despite some hopes of a revival of the centre-left in France and Canada, the current electoral picture for the established centre-left parties is grim. In 2017, the centre-left performed very poorly at the French (presidential) and Dutch elections, and lost the Norwegian and German general elections. Despite some resurgence under Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, the UK Labour Party lost its third straight election. Of course, in the US, the Democrats failed to secure the Presidency for Clinton.

The centre-left, it seems, is facing a range of structural and wider problems, including declining union density, rising populism, a crisis of faith in the European Union and increasingly multi-party and pluralistic systems with growing competition for the older centre-left parties. These trends can be overstated, and play out differently in different regions, but something close to a pattern is evident. Despite receiving plaudits for its handling of the GFC, the ALP's general story has been one of decline since 2007, somewhat masked by the 2016 result. It remains unclear how far the ALP might be a case that leads to a broader revival of the centre-left (e.g. Wilson 2013). Indeed, it may find the next federal election even more of a challenge than the 2016 one.

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