

Albanese cannot just be Labor's new contortionist

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM May 24, 2019



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke.

Like Aldous Huxley, I am capable of being very stoical about other people's misfortunes — and never more so than when they afflict Labor and the disastrous policies it took to the election.

Those misfortunes are entirely of Labor's making. It could have run a resolutely centrist campaign. Instead, taking its traditional base for granted, it gave the priority to wooing the voters who "live right" but "think left", shielded by affluence and good fortune from the cost of the political positions they espouse.

The result was a set of tax and climate change policies that threatened jobs, jeopardised economic growth and made middle Australia fear for its future, repelling the very voters Labor needed.

Labor's choices were an error, but they were hardly an accident. Rather, they reflect the world view of its leadership, which is dominated by well-heeled apparatchiks who spend their days in social media bubbles that amplify and confirm every "progressive" myth.

Lacking any understanding of the great mass of Australians who are unwilling to sacrifice their livelihoods for the sake of feeling virtuous, those apparatchiks could not believe that the voters they think Labor owns might opt for the Coalition, whom they ridicule and despise.

But today's electorate is not that which made Bob Hawke prime minister in 1983: it is better educated, far less unionised and extraordinarily diverse. Most of all it is more volatile — and with the waning of the factors that once rusted voters on to a major party, they live glued to their baseball bats, waiting to trounce leaders who assume they have their votes in the bag.

That is exactly what voters did, yet again, last Saturday. But despite three losses in a row, there is no sign that Labor is genuinely willing or able to change.

Rather, living up to the old quip that those who cannot forget history are condemned to misinterpret it, Labor has repeatedly pinned the blame on everything but its policies, with excuses that range from Tony Abbott's scare campaign (which allegedly caused its loss in 2013) to the perfidy of the Murdoch press.

This time, like the job applicant whose self-confessed "weakness" is being too perfect, it argues that it was too honest and transparent — as if it had not adamantly refused to explain how its emissions targets would be met, had not been endlessly duplicitous on Adani, and had not deleted the details of its tax hikes from its website when they became an electoral liability.

Thus insulated from self-doubt, Labor has elevated its prejudices into an orthodoxy, denouncing as heresy all criticism of its climate change policies and doubling down on its commitment to vast spending increases that can be financed only by tax slugs on the middle class.

It has, in short, fallen into the trap Tacitus diagnosed almost 2000 years ago when he warned that nothing makes defeat more certain than becoming enslaved by the lies of which we ourselves are the creators.

Little wonder, then, that over the past two decades Labor's primary vote has tended to be some eight to 10 percentage points below its levels in the period from the end of World War II to the close of the 20th century.

Now an element of panic has set in, with Anthony Albanese being touted as the party's saviour. However, Labor's problem is not its leader but its policies.

Yes, Bill Shorten appeared "inauthentic"; but that is not because he is inherently more shifty than Albanese.

Rather, it is because there is an inescapable contradiction between Labor's policies and the values and interests of its traditional base, forcing Shorten — much like Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard before him — into contortions worthy of Cirque du Soleil.

And for so long as Labor's policies are set by the inner-city activists who control its agenda, that contradiction will remain, shredding Labor's primary vote, increasing its dependence on the Greens and precluding its return to the centre.

But none of that means the Coalition can rest easy. It is true that the Coalition, like centre-right parties generally, has always had a relatively heterogeneous social base, facilitating its adjustment to the changing composition of the electorate.

And it is also true that it has been more successful than Labor in preventing rivals from developing into frontal competitors.

As a result, its primary vote has not eroded as severely as Labor's, declining, compared with the historical average, by only two to three percentage points.

But there is an obvious similarity between the forces that sank Labor's hopes and those that have buffeted the Coalition since 2013, with the losses the Liberals suffered in formerly safe seats bringing that similarity into stark relief.

If the Coalition is to deal with those forces, it must show that it can tackle the nation's problems and help achieve its aspirations.

There are some grounds for optimism in that respect. The tax cuts, for example, highlight the strength of its economic team, with Mathias Cormann maintaining tight spending discipline and Josh Frydenberg using the room that creates for tax reform.

At the same time, despite virulent opposition from the renewables lobby — which has proven as corrupt and lubricious as any group of rent-seekers in Australia's history — Angus Taylor has finally begun to clean out the Augean stable that is energy.

And Matt Canavan's relentless promotion of the resource industries has set the basis for a new burst of growth in regional Australia, bolstering the Coalition's standing and making a decisive contribution to the election result.

However, there are also crucial areas in which the Coalition is struggling. Pope Leo XIII observed in one of his encyclicals that every error contains a grain of truth. Unfortunately, there is that and more in Labor's claim that the Coalition lacks a comprehensive vision for education, health and

aged care — and it is simply undeniable that whatever vision it has falls well short of a credible road map for reform.

But mere tinkering cannot resolve those areas' deep-seated difficulties; if they are left to fester, it will take more than a miracle for the Coalition to win the next election.

All that, however, lies ahead; this is Scott Morrison's moment, and he has every right to celebrate it.

A hero, said the ancients, is one who is favoured by the gods. Yet even more praiseworthy, they said, are those who are crushed by them but, despite that, triumph.

That is what Morrison has done, undeterred by the knockers, backstabbers and nay-sayers. No matter how great the challenges this new term of office brings, it is hardly possible to think of a better beginning.