Between social democracy and neoliberalism in a world in crisis: Putting the Albanese Labor Government in context

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Abstract
This special issue explores social democracy, labourism, and neoliberalism through investigations of the Albanese Labor Government's first term. Bringing together political science, political economy, and public policy, the contributions examine the Albanese Government's ideological commitments and how it has governed policy domains in crisis, such as housing, climate, and higher education.

This introduction discusses the context for the rise of the Albanese Government, including the global 'polycrisis', widespread discontent with politics, and Labor's electoral strategy. We frame the contributions of the special issue as examining the space between two poles. On one side, conceptualising Labor as attempting to address crises while hamstrung by decades of neoliberalism. On the other, understanding Labor as hewing to the neoliberal status quo and possessing a limited appetite for social democratic change. We position the special issue to contribute to wider debates on the challenges of social democratic policymaking in an era of global crisis.

Keywords
social democracy, neoliberalism, Australian politics, political economy, political parties

The purpose of this special issue of the *Australian Journal of Political Science* is to investigate how imaginaries of social democracy, neoliberalism, and labourism are changing through a conjuncture of global crisis. The issue explores the Australian experience of this phenomenon, via seven articles on the politics and policies of the Albanese Labor Government's first term. Each article focuses on an area in crisis, such as the global environment and Australia's role in addressing climate change; the provision of housing and higher education; the dilemmas of immigration policy; and, more fundamentally, notions of social democracy and labourism themselves.

Social democracy, according to Rob Manwaring (2021, 3), can be defined as a model for society, a political ideology, and a set of actors. In its model form, it stresses the governance of society through a mixture of market and hierarchy, wherein the state exercises regulatory and coercive power over capital but overall maintains the conditions for capitalist accumulation. In its ideological form, it expresses a principled commitment to redistribution and democracy. As a set of actors, it is identified with the mainstream centre-left parties who pursue reform and not revolution, such as the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

Scholarship on the crisis of social democracy dates back more than three decades, to the continuity/discontinuity debates of the 1980s and 1990s (Manwaring 2021). For many rusted-on social democrats of the twentieth century, the turn by mainstream centre-left parties away from class conflict and toward class consensus undertaken across the 1980s and 1990s represented a fundamental change in the purpose and function of these parties (Quiggin 2001; Bramble 2000; Pierson 2002; Lavelle 2008; Humphrys 2019; Frankel 1997). For others, the so-called Third Way represented a necessary mutation in centre-left politics for a globalised world economy, in which states could no longer protect their citizens from the market, but could seek other ways of ensuring their wellbeing (Manwaring 2021; Johnson 2019). The divergence between these groups of scholars hinges on how they conceptualise social democracy in relation to its bedfellows, like labourism and leftism, and its dreaded 'other', i.e. neoliberalism. If social democracy hinges on decommodification, class struggle, and redistribution from capital to labour, the Third Way was the demolition of mainstream social democracy and its replacement with a weaker, labourist outlook focused on ameliorating the worst parts of capitalist markets for workers. But if social democracy is mainly about improving the socio-economic status of the masses, managing the antagonisms between capitalism and democracy using public policies, and improving worker conditions, the Third Way was the only way for social democratic parties to pursue these aims while managing the pressures of economic globalisation. By grafting labourist convictions pragmatically onto neoliberal ones, it re-articulated a version of global market rule that could benefit the many.

Of course, in Australia these debates are further complicated by the fact that the original proponent of neoliberalism was none other than the ALP itself, pre-dating the rise of the Third Way in Britain and the United States by a decade (Humphrys 2019; Pierson and Castles 2002). Led by Hawke and Keating, the ALP advanced discourses of pragmatism, rationalism, and consensus, arguing that remaking centre-left politics and society itself as a harmonious collaboration between capital and labour was necessary to adapt to the conditions of the new

global economy Australia found itself in. The result was the disintegration of the power of Australia's working class and the wage-earner's welfare state (Castles 2001; Humphrys 2019).

Three decades later, the conjuncture for social democracy and labourism is different again, partly as a consequence of the choices made by—and the structures developed through—centre-left government and opposition (Adkins et al. 2020; Sloman 2025). The current conjuncture is riven with crisis. Critical scholars and major institutions alike can agree that the effects of climate change, technological revolution, inequality, and democratic decline add up to a 'polycrisis', whose causes and symptoms create governance traps and wicked problems nigh impossible to solve with public policies (Helleiner 2025; Torkington 2023). Scholars have analysed centre-left politics in this conjuncture through the lens of the 'thinning' of labourist commitments (Manwaring et al. 2024; Manwaring and Foley 2025); a supposed return of muscular industrial statism (Dean and Jackson 2024); and, as we explore below, the disconnect between political parties and the social forces they claim to represent. A recurring theme is the failure of the state to address crises in ways that matter and make sense to publics, recalling Offe's (1984, 35) oft-quoted conception of the 'crises of crisis management'.

It was in this context of polycrisis that the Albanese Government was elected in 2022: just after the Covid-19 pandemic, as a wave of inflation and technological change washed over the global economy, and as the full impacts of cultural atomisation and technological disenchantment began to become more politically clear (Jäger 2026). This special issue asks what social democracy, labourism, and neoliberalism mean for the Albanese Government in this context. We are interested not just in what Albanese's Labor says and how it frames problems and solutions, but also in what it has *done* in policy terms. The articles in the special issue explore the terrain between political discourse and the capacity of the neoliberalised state to change economy and society.

This introduction sets the scene for the remaining articles by outlining the political context in which the Albanese Government won power, first at the high level of the crisis of mass politics and traditional political parties, then in the more immediate sense of the electoral and policy debates and issues significant to its ascendance. Following that, we map the contributions to the special issue and their relationships to its key themes, before concluding with some gaps in the special issue and areas in need of further research.

Traditional politics and its discontents

The era of mass politics in advanced capitalist countries, centred on mass membership, trade unions, and political parties throughout the twentieth century, has broken down (Humphrys et al. 2020). Engagement in electoral processes has been declining, as has broader citizen engagement with social and political institutions (Burnham, 2014; Flinders, 2016; Hay, 2007; Mair, 2013; Stoker et al., 2018). The social base for many traditional centre and centre-left political parties in the Anglosphere and Western Europe has fragmented since the mid-late twentieth century. In some locations, such as the United States, dramatic re-orientations have occurred with profound consequences for political direction, internal coherence, and the ability

to maintain consistent political support, in the form of 'rusted on' voters who feel a connection to major parties.

For example, an observer at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago noted that the Democratic Party

> now acts as the party of labor and of capital; the party of debtors and of bankers; the party that mocks the Ivy League but is largely run by Ivy Leaguers; the party of anti-monopolists and of Silicon Valley; the party for immigrants and for border security; the party of insiders and of the marginalized; the party of the football team and of the sorority; the party of family and of freedom; the party of ceasefires and of the war machine; the party that opposes fascism but abets a genocide (Christian Lorentzen cited in Jäger, 2026).

If one was to remove the Americanisms — references to the Ivy League, Silicon Valley and sororities — we might mistake this as a passage about the contemporary ALP. In recent decades, traditional parties have had to re-make themselves as Janus-faced: not just in that they face two directions at the same time, but in that they are hypocritical and insincere in a way that politicians are particularly prone to, as the observer at the DNC underlines (Beunders 2011). We can see this in data outside the United States too. In the posthumously published *Ruling the Void* (2013), for example, Peter Mair sets out analysis of the state of politics in the European Union, arguing that there has been a clear trend towards popular disengagement impacting parties across the political spectrum. Mair built this analysis on empirical data including voter turnout, party allegiance, electoral volatility, party membership, and membership of civil society organisations such as trade unions, theorising the emergence of a 'void' between political elites and everyday people.

Adapting Mair's methodology to examine evidence for popular disengagement in Australia, Humphrys et al. (2020) argue that a similar phenomenon is present, with particular inflections for a local social democratic context shaped by labourism and the historical power of the organised industrial working class. The Australian social contract — predicated on widespread acceptance that people's social interests can be advanced via representative politics and democratic electoral processes — has undergone fragmentation, signified in widespread 'anti-political' sentiment. Anti-politics is understood as popular detachment from, distrust of, and contempt for political elites and their activities. The phenomenon, alongside other terms such as populism, is widely recognised in the media and mainstream commentary, as well as in scholarly research, as increasingly dominant in politics across advanced capitalist countries over the last three to four decades (Stoker 2011; Humphrys 2018; Clarke et al. 2018; Wood 2015; Stoker et al. 2018).

This remaking of the modern ALP has been occurring since the era of the Whitlam Government, yet this has not delivered the stable new voter base Labor sought — one diversified from white, blue-collar workers. Its contemporary voter base is volatile and at odds with the social class that gave it life, reflecting the influence of anti-politics. In fact, the ALP

likely appears more stable than it is, due to the same processes of fragmentation impacting the other traditional party of Australia, the Liberal Party (Ghazarian et al. 2026). As Mair (2013) argued, the age of stable democratic political systems is at an end. More than a simple lack of trust in traditional political parties, there is widespread evidence of outright hostility toward them. The relatively stable social democratic and labourist politics in twentieth century Australia 'was predicated on the widespread acceptance that representative politics, democratic electoral processes, and mass membership parties and trade unions, were central to advancing people's social interests' (Humphrys et al. 2020, 122).

This is the setting in which the Albanese Government came to power. The macro-political context of the hollowing out of the traditional bases of Australia's major parties, alongside declining faith in politicians and the political process itself, collides and combines with global and national events, revealing the internal contradictions and inconsistencies of the relationship between parties and the policies they advance. The capacity of Australian politicians and parties to change the Australian economy and society and convince the population that such changes are in their interests is at a low point.

The rise of 'Albo'

The events immediately preceding the election of the ALP are linked to this crisis of democratic engagement. Between Scott Morrison's 2019 re-election and his loss to Anthony Albanese in 2022, the political landscape of Australia tilted. Upon election, the Morrison government was immediately challenged by two unprecedented events: the Black Summer bushfires and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Black Summer fires, which began in July 2019 and continued through until March 2020, with the most severe damage and loss of life occurring in December and January, were an unprecedented 'natural' disaster driven by climate change. The fires burned 24.3 million hectares and killed 33 people directly, with a further 455 people dying indirectly due to smoke and ash pollution (Borchers Arriagada et al., 2020). They also delivered the return of a 'deep, long lived' hole in the ozone layer (Humphries 2022). These events were quickly followed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially excess deaths did not occur, due to strict border closures and restrictions on movement and contact outside of the home, with a small drop in mortality over expected levels in 2020 (-3.1%) because the spread of the flu and other illnesses was prevented. While leading newspapers argued that the Morrison Government led one of the best responses globally with low mortality rates, a quick roll out of vaccines, and relative economic stability, there was widespread discontent and criticism (Coorey 2022). Polling suggested about half the population (51%) disapproved of Morrison's handling of the pandemic, including the fact that he failed to take responsibility for mistakes he made (Roy Morgan 2021). These criticisms echoed earlier concerns during the fires that Morrison was absent as the fires were unfolding due to being in Hawaii on holiday, that he failed to listen to expertise from leading emergency responders about known fire risks, and that he and his government had failed to tackle climate change — which drove the severity of the fires — while in office. There were also viral moments when Morrison was heckled on visits to impacted communities, and when he forced

handshakes from a fire fighter and a pregnant local resident for the cameras (when they indicated they did not want to participate). There was a clear undertone that Morrison was dissimilar to the everyday Australians who had been impacted by the fires, and those on the front lines of the crisis. More broadly, the Morrison Government did nothing to alleviate concerns about the distance between the public and politicians. These factors set the stage for Morrison's demise and Albanese's election.

Albanese's campaign started early, only a few months after Shorten's election loss in May 2019. Albanese delivered speeches setting out his agenda for the country's future and, in doing so, he presented his vision for the future of labourism and social democracy in Australia. He promised a policy agenda that would tackle the cost of living, which had risen continuously since the Covid-19 pandemic. New policies would reduce power bills, grant wage improvements, and reduce the cost of medicine and healthcare (RMIT 2023). Albanese also committed to tackle the housing crisis, improve aged care, hold a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, and reduce emissions to address the climate crisis.

Albanese sought to craft an image of trustworthiness, distinguishing himself from Morrison and Shorten. The new leader and future Prime Minister presented himself as an everyday man who had struggled in life, often mentioning his working-class and public housing origins. The party, the media and even the electorate talked not of Albanese, but of the ordinary bloke 'Albo', who knew what struggle was. At a time when the ALP was under pressure due to the wider fragmentation of social democratic politics, made clear through declining primary votes and low levels of party membership, Albanese was seeking to establish himself by narrating the ALP's origins as a labourist party centred on improving the conditions of working people, as well as an option for middle-class and self-employed voters like tradies who were struggling economically. He recalled Bob Hawke's consensus politics on the campaign trail, presenting a party which would govern in the interests of the many, encapsulating business and upper-middle classes as well as workers and the poor (Foley and Manwaring 2025). Like Hawke, Albanese presented himself as at home with the business sector, but also as a man who had not forgotten his roots and understood the needs of ordinary Australians. Like with the election of Hawke in 1983, and the election of Kevin Rudd in 2007, the electoral wave that brought Albanese to power was imbued with a sense of hope of something different. Albanese finished his victory speech in 2022 with the promise of 'in Australia, the doors of opportunity are open to us all. And like every other Labor government, we'll just widen that door a bit more' (Albanese 2022).

The Albanese Labor government was elected after decades of unpopular neoliberal policy making on both sides of the aisle, at a time when the ALP's primary vote was at historic lows (Humphrys 2019). While the two-party system might not have been undermined to the point of failure, it was severely tested in 2022 and 2025. Primary votes for the ALP and the Coalition were historically low, and challenges from minor parties and independents proliferated, including the Greens, 'teal' independents, and more recently, One Nation (Butler 2026; Wilson 2026). Hawke was elected on a promise to solve the economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s by unifying labour and capital after the industrial upheavals of that period. Albanese, on

the other hand, was elected on a promise to address economic stagnation, persistent cost of living and housing crises, and the climate crisis, after bitter disappointment over Rudd's efforts, particularly with regard to the latter. Despite attempts to mobilise nostalgia for the tripartite Accord era, decades of neoliberalism and a context of growing hostility to politicians and the political process mean that old strategies could not simply be made new.

This was made clear in the setbacks and failures of the Albanese Government's first term. The loss of the Voice to Parliament Referendum reversed the government's momentum and seemed to dent any ambition it had on Indigenous policy (Carson et al. 2024). Western Australian Senator Fatima Payman left the ALP over its stance on recognising and supporting Palestinian sovereignty (Hurst and Basford Canales 2024). The perennial debate over housing affordability and accessibility was not resolved by any of Labor's many policy measures (Pawson 2024). Labor killed off key climate legislation and approved fossil fuel projects. It committed to cutting funding for the NDIS and continuing marketised delivery of social care. While Labor seemed to be addressing the crises which contextualised its ascendance back to government, it was doing so with incremental reforms to neoliberal consensus peppered with labourist rhetoric, rather than social democratic structural change. The question we must ask, then, as scholars of political science and political economy, is whether this is a matter of structure or agency. Is Albanese's Labor attempting to address the symptoms of crisis across policy domains, but finding itself incapable of doing so due to years of neoliberalisation hollowing the capacity of the state (Toner and Rafferty 2024)? Or does Albanese's Labor prefer small changes just to appear interested in addressing crises it has no genuine will to address?

The articles in our special issue sit between these two poles. They illustrate that the political and policy strategies of previous Labor Governments have reconstituted the terrain for the ALP to win and wield power in the polycrisis era. The Albanese Labor Government has mostly proven unwilling to directly address the deep challenge posed by policy restructuring combined with political disengagement. It has preferred to hew to the neoliberal status quo. The articles in our special issue suggest that the terrain between social democracy, labourism, and neoliberalism continues to be structured principally by the latter concept. The supposed end of the neoliberal era at the global level, felt acutely in Europe and the United States (Liu et al. 2026), has seen only minor thinning of neoliberal hegemony in Australia so far.

Overview of the articles

The contributions are structured to begin with wider assessments of the status of social democracy in the Albanese Labor Government, before narrowing to consider interventions enacted in specific policy domains in crisis. Tim Battin and Carol Johnson's contributions revisit the continuity vs discontinuity debate of the 1980s and 1990s, exploring whether the Third Way presented a rupture or mutation to social democratic parties. Battin explicitly carries the discontinuity thesis through two central contentions: that social democracy remains programmatically feasible, and that the ALP 'has long ceased to be a vehicle to carry out the project' (Battin 2026, 14). This, he argues, was abandoned during the Hawke and Keating years, and consigned the left faction of the party to be focused predominantly on issues of welfare and social policy, rather than fiscal and monetary policy. Through the period of the

Albanese government, Battin finds a similar pattern of lack of social democratic ambition in setting the economic agenda. Battin cautions against prescribing contradictory labels to the ALP, such as 'social democratic neoliberalism' (Conley 2025, 104). He argues that the Albanese government's exclusion of economic questions from political contestation has undermined the founding premise of social democracy, with consequences in exacerbating the disenchantment of citizens and the rise in right-wing populism and anti-politics.

Carol Johnson's contribution takes a different view, in line with her previous contributions to earlier debates on the continuity of social democracy in the ALP (Johnson 2019). Johnson argues that the Albanese government's record on neoliberalism is mixed, with several policy domains highlighting the genuine attempts of the current Labor government to introduce more social democratic measures, unwinding some of the neoliberal economic and social measures implemented during the Hawke, Keating, and Gillard years. Johnson attributes this shift less to a coherent anti-neoliberal programme than to Labor's longstanding 'social harmony' ideology, which sees the interests of capital and labour as interdependent rather than in conflict. However, she finds the efficacy of this ideology to be limited, with neoliberalism re-entering through Labor's apparent enthusiasm for the deregulatory 'abundance agenda' (Klein and Thompson 2025).

Through their differences, Battin's and Johnson's contributions frame the political context for the articles that follow. Battin sees the continuity of a neoliberal project that Albanese and the ALP will not claim, landing on the side of the distinction made above that the ALP is actively choosing not to confront the crises of the current conjuncture at the scale needed. Johnson sees Albanese's Labor as articulating a partial refutation of neoliberal ideology, but also as constrained by the institutional embeddedness of the neoliberal project through successive historic governments. The remaining articles in our special issue explore this tension in specific policy domains.

Matthew Ryan's contribution examines the policy domain of climate and energy. Despite a multitude of policies, funds and plans, real domestic emissions have barely moved, and fossil fuel exports continue at a historic scale. Ryan explores domestic power decarbonisation, the reproduction of fossil capital, and the renewable superpower imaginary. He concludes that the ALP is wedded to thin labourism rather than social democracy, and that its rhetoric and interventions demonstrate a tactical fatalism through the refusal to directly confront capital in either the production of, or the solution to, the climate problem. Ryan argues that a far more ambitious project of eco-social democracy is required to overcome the embeddedness of neoliberal market rule in the climate arena.

Similarly, Jacob Broom's article addresses housing policy. He focuses on the Albanese Government's Housing Australian Future Fund (HAFF), arguing that the protracted debate around the HAFF highlights deep contradictions in the ALP's approach to housing and the wider political economy. Broom analyses the debates around the HAFF to identify points of contestation and coalition formation, particularly concerning the government's attitude toward the financialisation of housing. The ALP was challenged from the left and the right on the

HAFF, and for each point of contestation, it chose to defend financialisation and defer to its relationships with institutional investors and financial markets, rather than challenging the role finance has played in causing the housing crisis. Broom argues that this illustrates the embeddedness of finance in the ALP's hegemonic project. He concludes that any celebration of a return of social democracy by the Albanese government should consider the limited willingness the government has shown to discipline private capital in its flagship policy to address the housing crisis.

Emily Foley's examination of the Albanese government's approach to temporary labour migration further illustrates the 'Janus-faced' nature of the contemporary ALP. Foley traces the trajectory of Labor's approach from reformist ambition in 2022 to political retrenchment while in government. She argues that three ideological impulses have historically shaped Labor's approach to migration: neoliberalism, citizenship-based multiculturalism, and labourism. Each contains both social democratic and market-oriented dimensions. Foley argues that the social democratic elements of Labor's approach to temporary labour migration were strong in the initial months of its first term in government, but proved insufficiently strong to contest market-oriented impulses once migration became an electorally salient issue. She concludes that the electoral salience of migration in the polycrisis era of heightened anxiety around resource scarcity and social distrust structurally entrenches the securitisation of migration and undermines social democratic reform in the area.

The final two articles take the opportunity to reflect on the crisis of Australian universities under the Albanese Labor Government. Both address the policy area of higher education, from two different angles. They speak to the immediate and deeper effects of the ALP's political and policy strategies on academic and student knowledge production and work lives. This is a particularly important area to consider in this special issue because of the possibility that our ability to research and criticise themes like social democracy, neoliberalism, and labourism is waning with the austerity and discipline biases of the neoliberal university.

Greg McCarthy's contribution takes a top-down approach to these questions, reading the government's reform agenda through the concepts of 'actually existing neoliberalism' and its tendency to 'fail forward' (Peck et al. 2018, 13), repairing market failure with further market mechanisms and thereby creating the conditions for the next failure. McCarthy identifies three contradictions in higher education governance: revenue constraint, ministerial governance, and university governance. He argues that the labourism present within the ALP ideological agenda has been genuine in intent but has failed to address the contradictions of the neoliberal system. This has left the issues within higher education to fail forward for future governments to manage.

Kate Thompson and Kelly Gerard examine higher education using a bottom-up approach, tracing the effects of Job-Ready Graduates reforms on the discipline of Humanities and Social Sciences. They find that the policy had no consistently observable effect on the curriculum, but that long-term rationalisation driven by chronic underfunding predating the Albanese Labor government era *did* have an effect. They argue that the continuation of the marketisation of

higher education and the commitment to fiscal discipline and incrementalism under the Albanese government through the Universities Accord will likely continue to structure curricula. This is crucial for our collective ability as critical social scientists to reproduce our disciplines and critique and theorise the nature of politics. The lack of commitment from the centre-left to create space for this by addressing the crisis of the neoliberal university bodes ill for our ability to produce knowledge on these debates in the future.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue diverge on some important points, not least on whether the Albanese Government's record is best read as a continuation of neoliberalism, a partial refutation of it, or its reinvention in new forms. Yet they converge on a common finding. Each highlights the difficulty faced by contemporary social democratic parties in pursuing social democracy as a guiding ideological framework for a major party of government, and in embedding social democratic principles across policy domains once in office. Whether the objective is addressing crises of climate, housing, migration or higher education, the pattern is one of reforms pursued within, rather than against, neoliberal structures and norms, and therefore of gains that are real but circumscribed and vulnerable to electoral pressures, or liable to fail forward and arise as problems for future governments. Part of the reason for this, we submit, is the crisis of political engagement identified above. When faced with deep-seated structural obstacles, political projects require mass support for significant change, but part of the polycrisis conjuncture is the diminution of the ability of parties to generate this kind of support. Albanese's Labor has not been able to recreate the institutional trust that it sought to early in Albanese's leadership. Anti-political sentiment remains widespread, with the 2024 IPSOS global survey finding that half of those surveyed think Australia is broken (IPSOS 2024). This is not surprising, given that the articles in this special issue have traced how despite promises big and small, the ALP has failed to address the crises that it set out to, just as previous governments did.

There are, inevitably, important issues that this special issue has not covered, and which warrant further research and analysis in similar terms to what we have marked out here. Three stand out for us as the editorial team. The first is the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the ALP's proposed reforms to it in its second term. The NDIS was marketised from inception, sitting between neoliberal logics of individualised funding and private care on one hand, and social democratic logics of collective responsibility and universal rights to basic necessities on the other (van Toorn 2022). The contradictions of its quasi-market system have caused the ALP to revolutionise one of its flagship social policies in Albanese's second term. Community groups and disability rights activists have come out strongly against these proposals (SBS News 2026). The NDIS is thus a policy project between neoliberalism and social democracy in the same sense as other policies explored above, and represents another example where the government has swung to the side of constraint and austerity when confronted with electoral difficulty.

The second issue is tax reform. The Albanese Government's 2024 decision to retract its promise to uphold the Morrison Government's Stage Three Tax Cuts represented a break with the idea that it would continue economic business-as-usual. Instead, it would take economic inequality seriously (Crowley 2024). Similarly, during the government's second term, the repeal of negative gearing for existing properties, changes to the taxation of capital gains, and changes to the taxation of large superannuation accounts have stood out as redistributive measures taken to 'rebalance a system that is more generous to assets than it is to labour', as Treasurer Jim Chalmers put it (Chalmers 2026). Assessing where and how much the ALP *has* seen fit to recentre redistributive economic policy in its reform agenda is a key building block for theorising its relationship to social democracy and neoliberalism.

The third issue is Indigenous policy, specifically in the months and years following the failure of the government to successfully legislate the Voice to Parliament as the centrepiece of the government's first-term vision for social change. There is plenty of scholarship analysing the aftermath of the Voice Referendum (e.g. Carson et al. 2024; O'Sullivan 2025; Appleby and Davis 2026) but less examining the effect of this defeat on the relationship between Indigenous policy in the centre-left or social democratic political project. Of concern is the possibility that defeat in this area will see the wider left become fearful of the impact of advocating structural political reform to advance Indigenous rights and material conditions, leaving the policy area to be dominated by the neoliberal Indigenous policies of the 2000s and 2010s (Strakosch 2015).

Beyond domestic policy, the government's foreign policy and relationship to global politics also invites scrutiny, particularly when we consider that the crises covered in this issue stretch beyond Australia's borders into global spaces. Labor's approach to Palestine exposed tensions between the party's professed values and its conduct that goes to the heart of the Janus-faced character of contemporary social democracy, as does its deepening alignment with the United States through AUKUS at a moment where the relationship itself appears under strain throughout the administration of President Donald Trump (Beeson et al. 2025).

On these issues, the global centre-left is confronting similar dilemmas to the Albanese Government in managing the symptoms of the polycrisis era, while bearing the weight of the past four decades of restructuring of the relationships between social democracy, labourism, and neoliberalism in centre-left parties (Sloman 2025). This special issue links such conceptual debates with the material ramifications of state policies, both historically and contemporarily. Given the void between what governments promise and what states seem to be able to achieve, we think there is an urgent need for taking the effects of state decisions and the operations of its policies seriously without discounting the relevance of analysis at the historical and ideological levels about what kinds of political projects are being produced. We hope that the readers will find the articles generative, and a challenge to deepen the discussion and debate on the future of social democracy and labourism in Australia and more widely. This special issue is far from the last word on the topic.

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