

International Progressive Campaign Forum & International Labor Conference

Sydney, Australia

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New South Wales Labor Women's Forum



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The purpose of my visit to Australia

I went to Australia to learn more about:

- the progress Australian women are making in their work and in politics
- the policies that are being developed as Australia is joined by immigrants including from Muslim countries

And to share with Australian women MPs and political activists the policies and campaign methods which have driven our progress here in the UK



Itinerary

In Sydney

- Attended the International Progressive Campaign Forum, joining sessions on Immigration and culture.
- Participated in a panel discussion at the International Labor Conference; 'an agenda for an open society: prioritising unity over identity'. I joined the Hon Robin Scott MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Brad Chilcott, Welcome to Australia, and chaired by Lenda Oshalem.
- Delivered a key note speech during the plenary session at the International Conference entitled 'Where have we come from and where to next: historical policy successes and new political directions. Joined this session alongside the Hon Wayne Swan MP, Brett Gale, Chifley Research Centre, Tom McMahon, former executive director, Democratic National Committee.
- Took part in a New South Wales Labor women's forum event with the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Neera Tanden, Kaila Murnain & Dee Madigan to discuss women's representation.
- Appearance on ABC's Q&A panel programme - the equivalent of BBC TV Question Time

I met with:

- Kaila Murnain, General Secretary, New South Wales Labor
- Hon Wayne Swan MP, former Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy Leader
- Jim Chalmers MP, Shadow Minister for Finance

- Hon Andrew Leigh MP, Shadow Assistant Treasurer

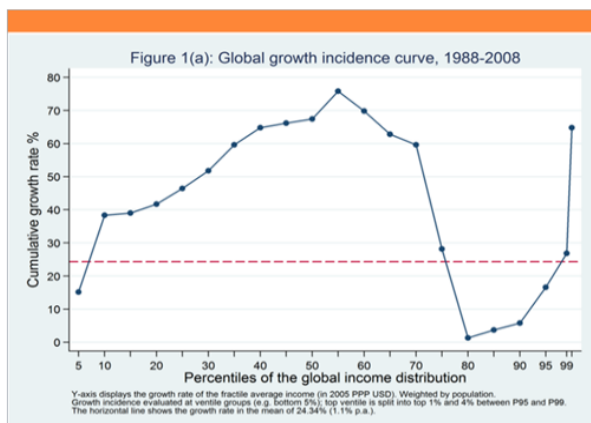


In Canberra

- Meeting with the Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten MP and his staff team.
- Meeting with members of the Shadow Cabinet including MPs from Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory.

Tackling an unequal economy

There is a marked contrast between the modern and thriving economies of the great coastal cities of Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide on the one hand and the economies of what is described as “rural and regional Australia” on the other. Australia has experienced decades of uninterrupted economic growth - its extractive industries and volume of trade with China protecting it from the worst effects of the Global Financial Crisis. But as in the UK there has been the problem of unequal distribution of the proceeds of economic growth and stagnation of living standards for those at the bottom of the income scale. So the questions of job generation and raising incomes at the bottom are at the top of Labor’s agenda and of its campaign for the General Election which is due in 2019 if not before.



(L-R) Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Neera Tanden, Wayne Swan MP, Phil Twyford MP & Sebastian Zwalf & Kaila Murnain

Ethnic disadvantage and immigration

The greatest disadvantage experienced by any ethnic group in Australia is not that of any migrant community but that of the indigenous people. At the start of all of the meetings that I attended, and at the beginning of every politician's speech, there was a formal acknowledgement of the rights indigenous people in the following terms:

"I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands where x now stands, pay respect to their Elders – past, present and emerging – and acknowledge the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to play within the x community."

Though the shops were full of aboriginal inspired prints, textiles and boomerangs, I did not see a single indigenous person in either Sydney or Canberra, with the exception of one man who was sitting on Circle Quay in traditional dress and body paint playing the didgeridoo.

Immigration, and particularly the issue of new Muslim immigrant communities is a concern of most longstanding Australians and therefore high on the political agenda. Australia is a country of successive waves of immigrants, initially from Europe. But in recent decades, because of its location, it now has increasing immigration from China and Indonesia as well as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. As in the UK, the left has the twin concerns of welcoming immigrants and protecting them from discrimination and protecting the living standards of existing Australian workers. As there is here, there is a preoccupation of how you both support the culture of communities from different parts of the world and at the same time encourage a level of integration to ensure that separation does not breed hostility. The National Party, in particular, fans the flames of hostility to immigrant communities from Muslim countries. The discussion within the Labor Party revolves around the need both to celebrate and control immigration and how to tackle immigration myths and islamophobia which are then exploited by populist anti-immigrant movements.



(L-R) With Chair Lenda Oshalem, Brad Chilcott & the Hon Robin Scott MP

Representation of women in politics

Just as in the UK, the demand for and progress on greater women's representation in politics has been led by the Labor Party where, as here, they have been taking affirmative

action to increase women's representation. This has been effective but is criticised by the Liberals and the National Party.

40% of Labor MPs are women compared to only 20% of the Liberal Party and 6% of the National party. 36% of the Shadow Cabinet are women and the Deputy Leader, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP is a hugely impressive, a well-known and widely respected leadership figure.

There is a great sense of feminist solidarity amongst the ALP women MPs (though they don't have the equivalent of our Women's PLP) and a real keenness to strengthen links with women MPs in the UK and in other countries where women are battling in politics to make progress for women in their own countries. Like women MPs in the UK many are young, "daughters of the women's movement" generation and have young children. Like UK women MPs they travel between their constituencies and Parliament at Canberra, but because of the huge size of Australia, many have homes which are many hours flight away from Parliament.



(L-R) With Dee Madigan, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Neera Tanden & General Secretary NSW Labor Kaila Murnain

The issue of tackling domestic violence is high on the agenda for the women MPs. Their foremost concern was the lack of childcare and its cost. And for many first generation Australian immigrants there are no grandparents on hand to help care for children. Unequal pay was also a big concern, particularly against the background of the Australian Labor Party's commitment to tackling inequality and stagnant wages. They have rights for women to challenge their employer over unequal pay. They haven't as yet taken the approach that we have of pay transparency with action by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to back it up but that is something that the ALP is actively considering for their manifesto.

I didn't detect the sense of cross-party working between women in the ALP and other parties which has been such a striking recent development in the UK. Perhaps this is because there has not been the same development of feminists moving forward in the Liberal Party, let alone the National Party.

Misogynistic abuse of women MPs

I did not come across any public discussion about online misogynistic abuse of women MPs. But those women MPs who I asked said it was very much part of their experience of being a woman in the public domain. Their approach was to try and ignore it and focus instead on the people they were in politics to represent. They didn't, as we now do, protest about it on a cross-party basis recognising it as an attack on our democracy and as a reflection of the abuse which women experience not just in politics but in all workplaces.

Sexual harassment

At the same time as I was visiting Australia, the news was dominated by a report of sexual harassment levelled against the Deputy Prime Minister, Barnaby Joyce, who was already under pressure. A member of the socially conservative National Party, he had been an outspoken champion of marriage and "family values" particularly highlighting his commitment to his wife and 4 daughters. He was under political challenge as it had emerged that he had left his wife and was having a baby with his press secretary. The complaint of sexual harassment which then emerged was from a woman who'd expected to remain anonymous while it was investigated. But her name was put into the public domain. The fact that her name was put in the public domain was met with overwhelming disapproval and the newspapers and news broadcasters reported only the bare minimum of information about her and refrained from producing pictures of her. This is in stark contrast to here in the UK. There were accusations and counter accusations between the National Party and their coalition partners the Liberal party about who had leaked her name. It turned out that she was an enormously well-respected woman from a rural background in Western Australia and had previously been named Rural Woman of the Year. Unlike in the UK when the complainant is routinely criticised and often vilified in the media, there appeared to be no attempt to undermine her character or credibility. On the contrary, Twitter was full of testimonials from other rural women and those who knew her asserting their support for her and her unimpeachable integrity. The Prime Minister who had criticised his Deputy over the political turmoil around his leaving his wife, said nothing about the sexual harassment complaint, or sexual harassment generally, only commenting that it was a matter not for him but for the National party and he wouldn't comment. The Deputy Prime Minister resigned, which most commentators attributed to his weakened position due to leaving his wife and having a child with his press secretary. The government discontinued the investigation of the complaint that Joyce had breached the ministerial code in respect of the employment of his mistress after he resigned as Deputy Prime Minister. Which is a bad thing to have done especially since he aims to return to ministerial office at some point in the future.

The Labor women pointed out the hypocrisy of Joyce's stance on family values but did not take a leading role in the press ferment around it and the sexual harassment saying instead that as the government was in turmoil and it was not focusing on the problems of everyday Australians such as the cost of living and job opportunities. They deplored the fact that the media was full of reports of the sexual harassment rather than the problems of living standards and public services.

Acknowledgements and thanks

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(L-R) With General Secretary NSW Labor Kaila Murnain, Clare O'Neil MP & the Hon Jenny Macklin MP



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