

Go target the Liberals, Albanese tells the Greens on his tail

Written by The Conversation USA

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce is not the only senior politician having conniptions about his seat. Anthony Albanese was in his New South Wales electorate of Grayndler on Monday, the first full day of the campaign, sandbagging it against the Greens.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale was in Grayndler too, sledging Albanese and declaring his party would give the seat “an almighty shake”. Describing the former deputy prime minister as “a decent bloke”, Di Natale said what counted was not positive rhetoric, but “how you back it up”.

Unlike Labor and Albanese, the Greens hadn’t voted to lock up young asylum seeker kids, Di Natale said. They didn’t support new coal mines. Labor and Albanese had joined with the Liberals against setting up an anti-corruption watchdog and ending large donations from the big end of town, he said.

Albanese gave as good as he got. What was Di Natale doing targeting him rather than a Coalition seat? The Greens were giving priority to “getting [member for Melbourne] Adam Bandt someone to talk to during Question Time over defeating the Malcolm Turnbull-led Coalition government”. As for voting records, had the Greens voted for a price on carbon in 2009 in the Senate “it would have been entrenched”.

Labor’s bad blood against the Greens runs hot. It was evident during the recent all-night debate over a new Senate voting system, when the opposition heaped abuse on them for siding with the Coalition to get the change through.

There is real fear in Labor that the Greens, having won and then held the former Labor seat of Melbourne, could threaten other ALP House of Representatives seats. This is a long-term Green ambition; they even eye off the Liberal seat of Higgins, once occupied by Peter Costello. Realistically, if the Greens could seize one seat on July 2, as well as retaining Melbourne, they would have taken a big stride.

While there has been speculation about various Labor electorates, the most vulnerable are Batman and Wills in Melbourne, and Grayndler, which has two state Greens seats in it.

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Batman is held by David Feeney, a factional player from the right, who replaced former minister Martin Ferguson in 2013. Feeney switched houses under a deal because he had an unwinnable place on the Senate ticket. In Wills, Kelvin Thomson, on the “green” end of Labor, has retired, leaving somewhat exposed a seat that was for a time in the 1990s held by left-leaning independent Phil Cleary.

Whether the Greens have any prospects in any of the seats will depend substantially on whether the Liberals preference them. The Victorian Liberals, after putting the Greens in the freezer at the 2010 and 2014 state elections and the 2013 federal election, are now reconsidering the position on preferences. The outcome, which would be in consultation with the federal Liberals, is uncertain. The Greens would not preference the Liberals but could issue “open” tickets in some seats.

Given the pressure on him from the Greens, the last thing Albanese needed on Monday was the Labor candidate for Melbourne, Sophie Ismail, telling Fairfax Media: “I have concerns about turnbacks, I don’t think they should be on the table”.

The comment put Bill Shorten on the spot. He could only keep repeating that “Labor’s policy is clear” – he would not let the people smugglers get back into business.

When he was asked about Ismail’s comment, Albanese – who at the 2015 ALP national conference voted (on the losing side) against turnbacks – said: “I’m not about condemning people for putting forward their views. They’re entitled to do so.”

Albanese has well-honed political skills, displayed both within the Labor Party – he supported Kevin Rudd’s return to the leadership while maintaining a functioning relationship with Julia Gillard – and electorally.

If Labor stays in opposition and Shorten performs only middlingly at the election, Albanese – whose biography is coming out soon – potentially would be a strong contender for the leadership.

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Like Joyce, Albanese is one of the best “retail” politicians in the parliament. They are much in demand by their respective sides to campaign in the marginal seats. But each is having to spend more time than is ideal defending his home turf. Albanese will be in Grayndler again on Tuesday.

The Conversation’s poll and election analyst, Adrian Beaumont, predicts Albanese will hold Grayndler comfortably even if the Liberals preference the Greens, “as he is a high-profile incumbent, and Labor won 46% post-redistribution in that seat”.

In the end, the odds are against either Joyce or Albanese losing his seat. But neither is willing to leave anything to chance.

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