

Bill Shorten says the lesson of Brexit is that people shouldn't be left behind

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has linked Britain's decision to leave the European Union back to inequality and people being marginalised, in a counter to Malcolm Turnbull's call for stability in the wake of the British vote.

Delivering his final week address to the National Press Club, Shorten said the Brexit by itself was "no cause for alarm – but its political and economic lessons cannot and should not be ignored".

"The Liberals invoke it to call for stability – but they fundamentally misunderstand the source-spring of the instability," he said.

"It comes from a sense of inequality, from people being marginalised, forgotten. A sense that political promises are wasted words.

"It comes from exactly the same sort of policies Malcolm Turnbull offers at this election. Tax cuts for the rich, nothing for the working and middle class.

"Telling a generation of young people, shut out of the housing market, to 'get rich parents'. Pricing kids out of universities, cutting funding from Medicare.

"It comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of the world economy and the Australian economy."

The Brexit vote has been consistently invoked by the government, which wants the election debate on economic issues as much as possible.

Shorten said what Australia needed most of all was the political capacity to build and invest in the economy, without giving away the returns. This included investment in education; roads, rail,

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bridges and ports; the NBN, and Medicare.

Shorten asked whether Turnbull planned to legislate and lock in his full A\$50 billion tax cut for the next ten years, regardless of events, or whether he would ditch it if times changed.

When questioned on whether he wanted to give himself any flexibility to break promises if circumstances changed, Shorten indicated he didn't need it. He was confident a Labor government could keep the promises made because it had done so much work on them in opposition.

Shorten said that when there was global uncertainty and domestic fragility "the last thing our economy and our society needs is a Liberal Party assault on the living standards of working and middle-class families".

"The gathering push of extreme right-wing populism around the globe are a warning to all of us not to leave people behind. Governments must include and empower people.

"We must give every citizen a sense of being an active participant in transition, not a passive observer of change."

If Australia wanted a strong free-market economy open to the world, living standards had to be lifted and participation encouraged, Shorten said.

"We have to make Australians partners in the national project. If we want to transition our economy, we have to take people with us.

"The best inoculation against division and regression is inclusive economic growth. That is the real choice between Mr Turnbull and myself."

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He accused Turnbull of lying over Medicare. “Next time you see the Liberal ad where Mr Turnbull says ‘Medicare funding is guaranteed’ you should know that he is lying to your face.”

Tuesday’s Essential poll showed Shorten’s campaign on Medicare is biting. It showed that 50% thought it was likely a re-elected Liberal government would attempt to privatise Medicare, with only 34% saying it was unlikely.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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