

## Wind in Albanese's sails as Chalmers weighs options

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Shadow treasurer Chris Bowen has pulled out of Labor's leadership race, increasing the pressure for an uncontested run for Anthony Albanese, which would prevent an extended limbo period for the party.

But finance spokesman Jim Chalmers, Albanese's only potential challenger, was still considering his position overnight. He will announce on Thursday morning whether he will run.

Bowen said he had decided to withdraw because, while he believed he would have a narrow majority in the caucus ballot, Albanese would beat him in the rank-and-file vote by a good margin.

"Hence I have reached the view that it would be unlikely for me to win the [overall] ballot." The party and caucus ballots have equal weighting.

Chalmers immediately tweeted:

I feel for Chris & I know it would've been hard for him to pull out. I'm being encouraged to nominate for leader & I'll now consider my options overnight. @AustralianLabor needs to rebuild, refresh & renew & I want to play a prominent role in that. What role is to be determined.

Chalmers, from the right, has been receiving support from those who believe the party needs generational change. Also, he is from Queensland, where Labor will have a big challenge in seeking to improve its support.

If he decides not to stand, he would be a strong contender for deputy.

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Labor's national executive met on Wednesday evening to tick off on dates if there is a contest. Nominations open Thursday and close Monday. If there is more than one candidate, a postal ballot would be held between May 31 and June 27, followed by a caucus ballot on July 1.

Joel Fitzgibbon, who earlier this week threatened to run for leader, threw his support behind Albanese, saying he'd had a long discussion with him "about my demands that the party strengthens its focus on regional Australia".

"I am satisfied that a Labor Party led by Anthony Albanese will provide that focus and he'll listen closely to the needs and aspirations of our country people."

There has been a pile-on of public support from senior Labor figures for Albanese. Labor's Senate leader Penny Wong described him as "the outstanding parliamentarian of our generation".

"Anthony Albanese knows who he is and he knows what he stands for. He's a man of authenticity and integrity. He's got a capacity to speak to people across this great country, to speak to people in the regions and in the outer suburbs as well as in our cities," she said.

Speaking before Bowen's withdrawal, Wong was asked about reports Bill Shorten was lobbying on Bowen's behalf.

She said she would be surprised if that were happening – "it would undermine the unity that Bill has been such an important part in rebuilding".

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Shorten sources said reports of the outgoing leader's activity (he encouraged Tanya Plibersek and then Bowen to stand) had been "overblown" – these had been the people he'd worked closely with.

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Kristina Keneally, strongly backing Albanese, said Labor "had our backsides handed to us on a platter" on Saturday. Keneally may get the post of deputy Labor leader in the Senate.

Albanese said he believed he had majority support in caucus if there was a contest, and recalled his win in the rank-and-file ballot after the 2013 election.

"So I am confident but not complacent about being able to succeed if another candidate comes forward."

If he became leader he would bring a different style to the position, he said.

"One of the things I won't do is walk along to press conferences and make policy announcements without consultation, on the run.

"I won't be obsessed by the 24-hour media cycle. We will have considered responses. We'll have respect for caucus processes."

He said that under his leadership Bowen would have "a critical role".

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In his news conference Bowen, who holds a seat in western Sydney, an area which has a big ethnic vote, made a strong call for the Labor party to give more attention to its attitude to “people of faith”.

He said it needed urgently to deal with “the matter of people of faith in our community not feeling that the Labor Party talks to them”.

He had noticed during the election campaign and afterwards “how often it has been raised with me that people of faith no longer feel that progressive politics cares about them.

“These are people with a social conscience, who want to be included in the progressive movement. We need to tackle this urgently. I think this is an issue from the federal election that we haven’t yet focused on”.

The Nationals’ Barnaby Joyce said that “Albanese would be an incredibly formidable leader of the opposition”, making the next election “vastly more difficult for the Coalition than the one we’ve just had”.

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## Barnaby Joyce doesn't expect frontbench spot

The Nationals meet in Canberra on Thursday, with their female representation tripled, from two to six, but the party’s cabinet numbers cut.

The Nationals held all their seats but one – Steve Martin, who joined the Nationals after replacing Jacqui Lambie in the last term, lost his Tasmanian Senate spot. The party room now

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numbers 21.

The good result has cemented the leadership of Michael McCormack, who had earlier been stalked by former leader Barnaby Joyce.

Joyce told *The Conversation* on Wednesday that he would like a position on the frontbench but "I don't expect to get one".

He said he would not be at the meeting. His partner Vikki Campion is expecting their second child soon.

McCormack chooses the Nationals frontbenchers who go into the Coalition ministry, with the number determined under a formula according to the proportion of seats won by the Liberals and Nationals.

The Nationals had five in the cabinet but are set now to have four under the formula.

What portfolios are allocated to the Nationals is a matter of negotiation between the prime minister and the deputy prime minister.

The new women are Perin Davey (Senate, NSW), Sam McMahon (Senate, NT), Susan McDonald (Senate, Queensland), and Anne Webster (Mallee, Victoria). They join deputy leader Bridget McKenzie and Michelle Landry from Queensland.

Nationals senators have to choose a new Senate leader to replace Nigel Scullion, who retired at the election. But that vote would be delayed – the new Senate does not come in until July 1. The obvious choice would be Resources Minister Matt Canavan, given the other Nationals senators, apart from McKenzie, will all be new.

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Thursday's meeting will discuss the party's priorities and canvass the Coalition agreement.

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

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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