

Grattan on Friday: Shocked Labor moves on – but to what policy destination?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Bill Shorten has said he likes doing the family shopping, nevertheless Tuesday's front page picture in The Australian did capture the savagery of changing political fortunes. There was Shorten, clutching a packet of Rice Bubbles, going through his gate.

While he was coping with a massive let down, a shell-shocked Labor party was moving with lightning speed to its post-Shorten era.

Not wanting Anthony Albanese, who had stalked him, as his successor, Shorten encouraged Tanya Plibersek, then Chris Bowen, to stand for leader. Plibersek quickly found she lacked the numbers and pulled back; Bowen on Tuesday declared he'd run but by Wednesday had decided that would be futile.

Colleagues of Shorten, who would have been crowding close to him if the result had been different, now resented any whiff of interference – a resentment no doubt intensified by the fact Shorten hadn't just been defeated but had lost in face of an overwhelming expectation of victory.

Jim Chalmers held out until Thursday, wondering if the call of "generational change" could get the numbers. He concluded it couldn't.

So finally Albanese, so long the bridesmaid, will get the prize. If you can call leader of the opposition, after a rout, a prize.

But maybe you can. After all, many thought Scott Morrison inherited a poisoned chalice last August.

Read more: [Why the 2019 election was more like 2004 than 1993 – and Labor has some reason to hope](#)

The Morrison government's majority will be small – the next election remains quite winnable for Labor. The outcome in 2022 will be determined by the comparative performances of Morrison and Albanese, and their teams.

We can expect (on the balance of probabilities) that these two will survive to that election. Rule changes in both parties bring more stability to the leadership (although there's never absolute certainty – before "Super Saturday" there was speculation that if things went badly Albanese was ready to make a challenge).

In style, there are similarities between Morrison and Albanese – perhaps summed up in their enthusiastic self-identification with their respective nicknames, "ScoMo" and "Albo". They're both knockabout, at ease mixing with people, fanatical about rugby league. When Albanese did the background briefings for the media after caucus meetings, more often than not these sessions started with a reference to the Rabbitohs' latest good or bad news.

Albanese comes to the leadership with the advantage of having positioned himself somewhat to the side during the Shorten years. So he is not associated with the crafting of controversial election policies, such as the franking credits crackdown, although of course he campaigned for them.

He made his independence felt in small as well as bigger ways – his press releases, for example, never went through the centralised channel of the leader's office, as did those of other shadow ministers. Albanese also has other advantages – not least that he doesn't have Shorten's closeness to the militant CFMMEU.

There is one contrast between Morrison and Albanese that's potentially important. During his whole political career Morrison has been the ultimate pragmatist, indeed a chameleon. Albanese, from Labor's left, in the past was quite stridently ideological, although the experience of government and later saw him shift to a more centrist, flexible position. Last year, in a major speech, he stressed the need for Labor to have a good relationship with business.

Read more: [Outrage, polls and bias: 2019 federal election showed Australian](#)

[media need better regulation](#)

However close the electoral margin and whatever his personal strengths, preparing Labor for its next run at government won't be easy.

Current policies will have to be overhauled and in some cases discarded, unlike after the 2016 election when basically they were added to.

Labor needs to better tune into middle suburbia, which proved less committed on issues such as climate change and more worried about economic management than the opposition had expected. Yet it can't afford to turn its back on the issues that concern its more progressive supporters. It will be a tricky balancing act.

If he's wise, Albanese will resist media demands that the ALP has a policy on everything instantly. It can afford to glide for a while, listening, thinking, weighing options. We all praised Shorten for Labor's long game approach, but Morrison showed how the sprint can work. Albanese needs something in between.

Meanwhile Albanese is signalling that Labor may put up a fight on the government's tax cuts legislation, which will be the first item when the new parliament meets.

There's agreement over the immediate cuts but the Coalition wants those scheduled for years on to be passed at the same time. If the Senate refuses, the government will need to give way – politically, it can't afford to do anything else. It has already had to concede it won't meet its promised timetable for delivering this relief from July 1, because parliament is not able to meet before then.

Read more: [After Clive Palmer's \\$60 million campaign, limits on political](#)

advertising are more important than ever

Among the many challenges confronting Albanese will be where he takes Labor policy on climate change – the debate is already starting with comments from environment spokesman Tony Burke.

For some, the election was to be much about climate – at least as much, perhaps, as the 2007 election was. In fact, in terms of results, on that issue it's been more of a setback than a positive.

The climate debate may have helped Zali Steggall dislodge Tony Abbott in Warringah, but arguably Abbott's own behaviour – his defiance of the electorate on same-sex marriage, his destructive role in the Liberal party – was what really killed him.

Activists threw everything at the climate issue, but much of the effort turned out counter-productive.

Labor, trying to walk both sides of the street on Adani and internally divided over that controversial project, lost votes in the Queensland mining areas. The anti-Adani convoy, led by Bob Brown from the south to the north of the country, backfired in Queensland.

To cap things off, after Saturday's result Queensland Labor premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, who faces an election next year, immediately demanded the Adani approval process be put on skates.

Adani is likely, it seems, to get an early go-ahead, which will deeply disappoint many activists. But for the new Labor leader, that could be a relief, taking an awkward issue off the federal Labor agenda.

Grattan on Friday: Shocked Labor moves on – but to what policy destination?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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 their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-shocked-labor-moves-on-but-to-what-policy-destination-117698>