

Mark Butler calls for “ruthless” re-examination of Labor policies, including on climate

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Labor frontbencher Mark Butler has delivered a scathing critique of Labor’s election failure and called for a “ruthless” examination of all its policies, including on climate change.

Nothing should be sacrosanct, Butler said on Monday, launching in Canberra *Story of Our Country: Labor’s vision for Australia*, by academic Adrian Pabst.

The call by Butler, past national president of the Labor party, for a root and branch overhaul of policy contrasts sharply with the line from the current ALP president, Wayne Swan. Launching the same book in Sydney last week, Swan declared Labor should not walk away from its election agenda.

The two views reflect the different strands in the party’s current internal debate about its future policy direction.

Swan said Labor had had “an agenda to be proud of, not to resile from, after a narrow loss.” “Sometimes you’ve got to take one for history and maybe, in a sense, we did that in May,” he said.

Butler, who is spokesman on climate change and energy, painted the defeat much more darkly. “Let’s not sugar coat the result in May,” he said. “We got our lowest primary vote in a century, against a government the Prime Minister himself described as *The Muppet Show*. When you get your backside handed to you by Fozzie Bear and Kermit the Frog, it’s time for some serious reflection.”

Butler said while arguably Labor at state level was the natural party of government, “we face a much harder task when it comes to the bread and butter of federal politics: national security and broad economic management.

“Our only three victories over Liberal governments since World War II all involved an immensely popular leader, a compelling national vision and a superior campaign,” Butler said.

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“Every federal election is monumentally tough for Labor and 2022 will be no different.

“That’s why our policy and campaign review must be ruthless and unsparing.

“It will – and it should be – deeply uncomfortable,” Butler said.

“Nothing should be excluded or treated as sacrosanct.

“The area I had responsibility for – climate change and energy – must be part of that thorough examination.

“As should all of our taxation policies and the spending commitments they were directed at funding.

“Of course, any review will be guided by our values as a Labor Party. But all of us should welcome it being utterly thorough,” Butler said.

The election campaign post mortem, due to be finished next month, is being done by former South Australian premier Jay Weatherill and former Labor minister Craig Emerson. The broad policy overhaul will go on for much longer, as the opposition prepares its pitch for the 2022 election.

Swan, a former treasurer who is no longer in parliament, said in last week’s speech: “We were right when we argued for a fair distribution of wealth and when we argued to stand up on a pivotal issue like climate. We might not have got every bit of messaging and campaigning right, and our defences could have been constructed better, but we were where it mattered, when it mattered. And we will be again, in the future. It’s in our DNA.”

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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.

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